KEN SALAZAR

October 19, 2026

Dear Minority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader Jeffries,

Should Democrats take control of Congress next year, there will be significant work ahead to address the damage of the last two years and deliver for the American people. As part of that work, I'm writing to ask that you make oversight of the current administration and the United States Department of the Interior's unlawful treatment of public lands a top priority.

Our national parks, monuments and public grounds belong to the American people. Congress passed laws to protect them and gave the Interior Department the job of protecting them for future generations. From the beginning of this administration, those laws have been broken repeatedly. This administration has rushed reviews, courts have been misled, and money from the anonymous private donors has flowed into projects on public land with almost no transparency. Time and time again, the decisions being made to destroy our public lands have reversed our nation's bipartisan tradition of doing what's best for our national parks and our treasured national landscapes. The courts can slow the damage and halt some of the destruction, but only Congress can find out who made these decisions, who paid for them, and how to keep it from happening again.

Just this June, the administration waived bedrock environmental laws to build a border wall through Big Bend National Park and in doing so violated the National Park Service Organic Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The current plans would run a wall through Mariscal Mountain, which would mean extensive dynamite blasting and destruction of parts of Big Bend National Park.

Let me be clear, this wall has nothing to do with border security. I am for border security. The river gorge and canyons already create a natural barrier. Indeed, five sheriffs along that stretch of the border opposed the construction, as did seven former park superintendents. Even the Texas Land Commission sent a cease-and-desist letter over the clearing of state land. On October 2, a federal judge halted all construction and ground-disturbing work in the sector for now, and six lawsuits are pending. Congress should ask the administration two plain questions: how is this legal, and what security need justifies it?

The administration also plans to build a 250-foot arch at Memorial Circle, twice the height of the Lincoln Memorial, between the Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. The Park Service's own review found it would harm several historic sites and the capital's skyline, yet the agency approved it anyway under pressure from the President. Arlington County has sued the Department of Interior and the National Park Service over what it calls a cursory environmental review, and Vietnam War veterans have filed their own suit. Even so, the administration is pushing for final approval from the National Capital Planning Commission on November 5. They should summarily reject the proposal as an affront to our National Parks. The National Mall is America's front yard, and a keystone of our National Park system.

It should also be alarming to you and to all the members of Congress that on Saturday, October 10, Park Service crews cut down 529 trees at East Potomac Golf Links on the National Mall with no approval from Congress. This was done to make way for the President's new golf course. Some of those trees were planted by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1939. Congress should find out who authorized this and whether any proper approval was ever given.

Finally, the President's ballroom was reportedly paid for with private donations routed through the Trust for the National Mall and into a White House account the President controls directly. Under the agreement governing those gifts, I understand the Trust must keep donors anonymous unless the White House approves disclosure in writing. That arrangement raises serious questions about whether donors received regulatory decisions or government contracts in return for their donations. Congress should identify who funded the ballroom and put safeguards in place so no future president can demolish part of the White House in this way. It is the people's house, not the President's.

None of this should be a partisan matter. Overseeing the executive branch is Congress's constitutional responsibility, and it is the surest way to give Americans confidence that these places will still be here for their children and grandchildren.

The National Mall is America's front yard, and a keystone of our National Park system. Many have called our National Parks America's "Best Idea." All our national parks are part of that idea and should be protected. That is the responsibility of the executive, legislative and judicial branch. It is at the core of what we are as Americans.

As a former Secretary of the Interior, I thank you for your leadership on these matters and urge the new Congress to take up this work as swiftly as possible.

Sincerely,

Ken Salazar

Ken Salazar
Former Secretary of the Interior (2009-2013)

Cc:
Senator Michael Bennet
Senator John Hickenlooper
Representative Diana DeGette
Representative Lauren Boebert
Representative Jeff Crank
Representative Jason Crow
Representative Gabe Evans
Representative Jeff Hurd
Representative Joe Neguse
Representative Brittany Petterson