

September 25, 2026

Dr. Tisa Mason, President
Dr. Jill Arensdorf, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Fort Hays State University
600 Park Street, Hays, KS 67601

Alysia Johnston, Chair, and Members of the Kansas Board of Regents
1000 SW Jackson Street, Suite 520
Topeka, KS 66612

Re: The Future of the Sternberg Museum of Natural History and Its Collections

Dear President Mason, Provost Arensdorf, and Members of the Kansas Board of Regents,

The Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance) writes to express our profound concern regarding recent reports that Fort Hays State University may choose to close the Sternberg Museum of Natural History. As one of the premier natural history museums of the Great Plains, the Sternberg is not only a beloved public institution but a globally significant research collection, a place for experiential learning, and an irreplaceable scientific asset to Fort Hays State University, the city of Hays, the State of Kansas, and the broader scientific and museum community.

The scientific collections held by the Sternberg Museum—more than three million paleontology, botany, zoology, and geology specimens—constitute an irreplaceable resource to the national and international community. These collections document life and environments across the Great Plains over hundreds of millions of years, and they are essential for addressing the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, from tracking the impacts of climate change and protecting biodiversity to informing land management, agriculture, and public health.

Sternberg's holdings are of exceptional historical and scientific significance. The museum's paleontology collection, rooted in the pioneering fieldwork of George F. Sternberg, includes world-renowned Cretaceous fossils of the Western Interior Seaway—among them the celebrated "Fish-within-a-Fish," one of the most iconic vertebrate fossils ever discovered. The paleobotany division houses more than 500,000 fossil plants, including the largest collection of fossil grasses in the world, and the historic Elam Bartholomew Herbarium is a botanical collection of international standing. The zoological holdings, including both traditional specimens and genetic samples, form an active reference archive for the region's living biodiversity. Sternberg has received multiple competitive federal grants to support enhancements to the collections, investments that highlight both the university's stated commitment to long-term care and the significance of the collections.

Critical to the stewardship of these collections are the curatorial and collections staff who care for them. These experts maintain the specimens and their associated data, train students in

biodiversity, ecology, and museum studies, support visiting researchers, and connect the collections to exhibits, education, and public outreach that reach thousands of Kansans of all ages each year. The loss of this specialized expertise would be as damaging as the loss of the specimens themselves. FHSU faculty and students associated with the Sternberg Museum have earned major awards for teaching and research from the pre-eminent American scientific societies in their disciplines, and alumni have gone on to distinguished careers in the natural sciences, including many in museums nationwide.

As a place where students of all ages learn about both the natural world and the way museum collections support science, the Sternberg Museum has opened doors for FHSU students and the Hays community. Natural history museums are not just where students learn about fossils, insects, or plants, they are where students discover that they themselves really can be paleontologists, zoologists, or botanists. The closure of the Sternberg Museum will undoubtedly lead to the loss of hands-on training and experiential learning opportunities, making the paths to careers in these disciplines less accessible to future FHSU students.

Scientific collections are not static archives; they are active, dynamic tools for discovery. Every specimen represents an irreplaceable snapshot of a species at a specific point in time and space. In an era of rapid environmental change and habitat loss, the documentation of life on the Great Plains provided by the Sternberg collections is more relevant today than ever. Once dispersed or neglected, such collections—and the institutional knowledge that accompanies them—cannot be reconstituted.

We recognize the very real budgetary pressures facing Fort Hays State University, including the recent reduction in state appropriations, and the difficult decisions those pressures create. The NSC Alliance maintains that the stewardship of such an invaluable resource requires a commitment to expert, long-term care as well as continued accessibility to the global research community. Any administrative or structural changes at the Sternberg must prioritize the integrity of these collections and the continuity of the staff who steward them. Their destabilization would represent an immense and permanent loss to Fort Hays State University, its students, the State of Kansas, and the global scientific community.

The NSC Alliance stands ready to help. Our organization and our members have deep experience navigating institutional transitions, developing sustainable models for collections care and funding, and connecting collections to the professional networks and resources that keep them viable. We would welcome the opportunity to serve as a resource and partner to museum and university leadership as you consider the path forward.

We respectfully urge the administration of the Sternberg Museum and Fort Hays State University to find a resolution that ensures a sustainable future for these vital resources and the associated museum-based expertise. We encourage decision-makers to consult available experts and resources, including professional societies such as the NSC Alliance, as the discussion moves forward. We remain hopeful for an outcome that honors Sternberg's scientific and public

education mission and provides the stability needed to continue its institutional excellence. The Sternberg is a shared treasure—a foundational record of the Great Plains’ natural history and a key to its future.

Sincerely,

Trina E. Roberts, Ph.D.
President
On behalf of the Natural Science Collections Alliance

About the Natural Science Collections Alliance

The Natural Science Collections Alliance is a non-profit association that supports natural science collections, their human resources, the institutions that house them, and their research activities for the benefit of science and society. Our membership consists of institutions that are part of an international network of museums, botanical gardens, herbaria, universities, and other institutions that contain natural science collections and use them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, and outreach activities.

cc:

Eric Grospitch, Senior Advisor for Executive Operations, Fort Hays State University
Mark Arant, Dean, Werth College of Science, Technology and Mathematics, Fort Hays State University