




**TO:** The Honorable Members of the Board of Regents

**FROM:** Betty A. Rosa

**SUBJECT:** Appointment of Ms. Jennifer Saunders to Assistant Commissioner and New York State Museum Director

**DATE:** July 03, 2025

**AUTHORIZATION(S):** 

**SUMMARY**

**Issue for Decision**

Will the Board of Regents approve my recommendation to appoint Ms. Jennifer Saunders as Assistant Commissioner and Director of the New York State Museum?

**Reason(s) for Consideration**

Ms. Jennifer Saunders is a seasoned museum executive with more than two decades of leadership in public institutions, philanthropic organizations, and statewide initiatives. She has served as Director of the Washington State Historical Society and the Washington State History Museum since 2011, overseeing multidisciplinary teams that include historians, educators, and curators. Her leadership has advanced major capital projects, educational programming, and public engagement strategies that speak to both cultural and scientific inquiry.

Ms. Saunders began her career in philanthropy at the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, where she developed a strong foundation in nonprofit management, grantmaking, and strategic program development. As Executive Director of the Harbor History Museum, she successfully led an \$11.7 million capital campaign and oversaw the construction of a new facility, while growing the museum's operating budget by 233%. These efforts significantly expanded public access and deepened the museum's community presence. Her steady progression into statewide leadership has been marked by a commitment to operational excellence, strategic vision, and inclusive storytelling.

Under her leadership at the Washington State Historical Society, Ms. Saunders has overseen the redesign of the flagship Washington State History Museum's core exhibition spaces, most notably the transformation of the *Great Hall of Washington History*. This includes the development of *This is Native Land*, a major new permanent

exhibition created in collaboration with Indigenous curators that centers Native sovereignty, history, and resilience. During her tenure, she also successfully grew the museum's operating budget by 100%, enhancing the institution's capacity to deliver interdisciplinary programs and statewide services. In addition, she led the "Black History in Washington" project, which resulted in the creation of a digital app, curriculum-aligned resources, and a permanent monument to Black Pacific Northwest pioneer George Bush on the State Capitol Campus.

Saunders also led a \$10 million statewide capital grant program and enhanced infrastructure for local museums and heritage organizations, establishing new funding pathways and awards that elevated excellence in community-based history. Her leadership and expertise have also positioned her as a key voice within the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), where she has served on the Governing Council and will co-chair the 2026 national conference. In addition, she serves as an active accreditation peer reviewer for the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), underscoring her commitment to advancing best practices and professional standards across the museum field.

Ms. Saunders holds a B.A. in Political Science and Economics from Wellesley College and an M.A. in Politics from the University of Oxford, where she studied as a Marshall Scholar. She is actively engaged in professional service, including her role on the advisory council for the Milgard Women's Initiative at the University of Washington Tacoma. She is widely respected for her collaborative leadership style, financial and operational acumen, and ability to align institutional vision with community impact.

With a demonstrated ability to lead complex organizations, serve diverse stakeholders, and drive interdisciplinary initiatives, Ms. Saunders is exceptionally well qualified to serve as Assistant Commissioner and Director of the New York State Museum.

### **Proposed Handling**

The appointment will come before the Full Board of Regents for action at its July 2025 meeting.

### **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Board of Regents take the following action:

VOTED: that the Board of Regents approve the appointment of Ms. Jennifer Saunders to the position of Assistant Commissioner and Director of the New York State Museum.

### **Timetable for Implementation**

If the Board of Regents approves the recommendation, the appointment will be effective and Ms. Saunders will assume the position on September 4, 2025.