Hello everyone, I’m Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez, representing the beautiful and beautifully diverse 3rd Congressional District of Nuevo Mexico. It’s an honor to be with you all for this year’s PastForward Conference. This conference is a beautiful celebration of the love we all share toward preserving our diverse stories and our diverse communities. Our nation has infinite stories of struggle, of conflict, of historical trauma, and, yes, cultural celebration.

As a young girl, we had poetas, músicos, and writers stream through my home as my parents worked to preserve our language and herencia. They understood that preserving the stories, preserving the culture made us stronger as a community, but also made us more open to celebrating other stories and cultures. Understanding the historical trauma and historical beauty of our herencia was as key for my family as it is for our beautifully diverse country. Your work is at the forefront of saving those stories, especially the difficult ones, which in the end can be even more important than those that celebrate the joyous occasions in our history.

Having a strong historical identity is a gift. A gift that allows us to celebrate each other, our similarities, and, most importantly, our differences. My experience in cultural preservation informs so much of what I’m doing in Congress. As a Nueva Mexicana and a former Advisory Council on Historic Preservation vice chairwoman, I understand the importance behind preserving and protecting our most precious natural resources: our lands, our waterways, and our historic monuments.

That’s why I’m working to ensure you all have the resources you need to move forward. I’m proud to have secured an amendment in the INVEST in America Act to permanently authorize the Historic Preservation Fund and double its reauthorization of appropriations level to $300 million for each fiscal year. The authorization level of
the HPF has not increased since its establishment in 1976. That’s over 40 years. And since then, it has never been fully appropriated. I’m committed to changing this. I’ve been working on a bill now, too, for the support of the Historic Preservation Fund, as well.

I was also able to secure key wins in the House Natural Resources Committee markup of the president’s Build Back Better Act. One of those prevents funds from being used to lease or nominate land within the 10-mile buffer area around Chaco Canyon. And it provides an additional $600,000 to ongoing tribal cultural resource studies in the Chaco Canyon area. Sadly, if we destroy a cultural resource, if we erased 23,000-year-old footprints, we lose that resource. We lose that discovery forever.

Our Build Back Better draft also included additional funding for historic preservation. Preservation priorities are national priorities, because now we have a president in the White House who cares and sees the value in this work.

I’m sure you all celebrated as I did President Biden’s reversal of the devastating Trump executive order dramatically downsizing Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante. The restored boundaries of these monuments and the added protections for the Northeast
Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument signal to us the start of a new chapter.

We couldn’t have gotten here without your activism, without your advocacy, without your commitment to our history. Let’s keep those stories coming. Let’s act boldly, together.

*Muchisimas gracias.* FJ

CONGRESSWOMAN TERESA LEGER FERNANDEZ represents the 3rd Congressional District of New Mexico.