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## Historic Model T birthplace halts improvements after feds cancel \$500,000 grant

By [Sherri Welch](#)



Credit: Ford Piquette Avenue Plant

The Ford Piquette Avenue Plant, a National Historic Landmark in Detroit, was the birthplace of Henry Ford's Model T and is in need of accessibility improvements.

The Ford Piquette Avenue Plant, the birthplace of the Model T, has indefinitely tabled accessibility and preservation improvements after the National Endowment for the Humanities abruptly canceled a grant announced in early 2024 to support the \$2 million project.

The \$500,000 NEH grant to Piquette was to have funded projects including a new passenger elevator that would have enabled more sparing use of the historic freight elevator at the plant and the installation of restrooms on every floor of the 121-year-old site, which draws tens of thousands of visitors from around the world.

The Piquette cut appears to be part of broader cuts made, according to an [NPR report](#) that said millions of dollars in previously awarded federal grants intended for arts and cultural groups across the country are being canceled by the Trump administration.

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[Henry Ford's Piquette Plant changed the world. This nonprofit is fighting to preserve it. 1st floor of Piquette plant, birthplace of Model T, opening to public.](#)

“Your grant no longer effectuates the agency’s needs and priorities and conditions of the grant agreement and is subject to termination due to several reasonable causes,” Acting NEH Chairman Michael McDonald said in a letter dated April 2 sent to the facility's nonprofit operator, the Model-T Automotive Heritage Complex Inc., dba Ford Piquette Avenue Plant.

“NEH has reasonable cause to terminate your grant in light of the fact that the NEH is repurposing its funding allocations in a new direction in furtherance of the president’s agenda,” McDonald said in the letter, pointing to President Donald [Trump’s Feb. 19 executive order](#) that mandates the NEH eliminate all non-statutorily required activities and functions.

“Your grant’s immediate termination is necessary to safeguard the interests of the federal government, including its fiscal priorities,” he said, and “represents an urgent priority for the administration.”

McDonald said NEH terminated the Piquette grant in its entirety effective April 1, yet noted: “Please remember that your obligations under the grant agreement continue to apply. Additionally, an audit may be conducted by the NEH after the termination of your grant.”

The letter to Piquette was issued a day after [The New York Times reported](#) that NEH managers had notified staff that Trump’s Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, was recommending that as much as 70%-80% of the NEH's 180 employees be cut and that all grants made under the Biden administration not fully paid out be canceled.

The NEH initially gave the Detroit museum until 2026 to raise another \$1.5 million to secure the grant but that was extended earlier this year to 2029, Piquette President and CEO Jill Woodward told Crain's on Thursday. So far, it has raised \$600,000 toward the project.

“There were some questions in the (NEH) grant application about how you address DEI. Most grants for many years had asked how you were addressing DEI,” she said.

The museum, which is operating on an \$850,000 budget with three full-time staff and just more than a dozen part-timers, would have included the diverse group of students coming through the museum for educational programs, she said. “But I’m not sure if that was the rationale” for canceling the grant, she added.

“We are excellent at compliance, thanks to our volunteers ... I’m stunned that this has happened,” Woodward said.

Piquette would have been eligible to invoice the NEH for a third of the original grant or about \$167,000, based on the amount it has raised for the project so far, Woodward said. But the value of securing the NEH grant went beyond the dollar amount.

“It’s very difficult for an organization of our size with our bandwidth to raise \$500,000,” Woodward said.

The NEH grant, awarded in January 2024, was the building block for the capital improvements plan, creating momentum to show donors Piquette had the capacity to get the funds raised, she said.

“When the federal government says we believe your project is valuable to the community ... that inspires donor confidence,” Woodward said.

The NEH grant to Piquette, which is on the Register of Historic Places and is designated as a Michigan State Historical Site, was part of \$33.8 million in grants made to 260 humanities projects around the country. About \$1.75 million of the total grants made last year went to Michigan arts and culture groups. Others on the list include:

- \$500,000 matching grant to the Grand Rapids Public Museum for the renovation of its Community Archives and Research Center to enhance public accessibility and educational programming.
- \$150,000 matching grant to the Flint Institute of Arts to install energy-efficient humidifiers to ensure continued protection of its collections.
- \$149,952 to Western Michigan University for a three-year project to develop credit-bearing, humanities-centered coursework that will offer a pathway to a four-year degree for incarcerated people.

In January of this year, the NEH announced another \$22.6 million in grants for 219 humanities projects across the country. Michigan humanities projects drew \$466,120 total, with grants including:

- \$149,981 to the University of Michigan to collect 20 oral histories for the Ypsi Farmers & Gardeners Oral History Project.
- \$126,139 to a research project at Wayne State University to expand the Hamtramck Explorer Deep Map to include local archival and archaeological objects, the ability for the public to submit their own community stories and information, and an enhanced mobile interface

- \$60,000 to a project at Michigan State University to research and write a book about Franca Rame, the late Italian actor, feminist and political activist, and her contributions to post-World War II Italian leftist political thought.

It was not clear if any of those grants were also canceled.

Piquette's nonprofit operator had engaged Detroit-based Albert Kahn Associates to design the enhancements to the building, convened hundreds of meetings with internal and external stakeholders to do prep and compliance work for the grant, begun interviewing construction managers in recent weeks and was preparing to send out requests for proposals by fall, Woodward said.

"We spent so much of our human capital to get to this point. To have it yanked out from underneath you is just devastating," she said.

Piquette will likely push back its timeline for the projects, assuming it can replace the government grant with other sources, she said.

"Will we try to bite it off in smaller pieces, do it on a more prolonged time frame? We're going to look at all strategies to move this forward to accommodate the thousands of people who come each year," Woodward said.

Smaller pieces could include projects such as locating and installing period-specific Douglas Fir wood to shore up the area of the third floor where restrooms are planned, she said. "But as far as the big pieces like the elevator and the restrooms, we may look (now) at spreading those out over time," she said.

"You lose economy of scale when you do that ... and the prices will change ... we don't know how the [tariffs](#) are going to impact anything we might have to purchase from outside the country," she said.

Construction of the [Piquette Flats apartment building](#) next door to the plant dampened foot traffic a bit last year, Woodward said. But this year a projected 40,000 visitors are expected to visit the plant museum through events booked for the site, Great Lakes cruise tours, private tours, school groups and general public visitation.