AMERICAN ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

March 16, 2022

The Honorable Bill Nelson
NASA Administrator
NASA Headquarters
300 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson,

I am writing to follow up on my letter to you dated November 17, 2021 concerning the naming of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST). The American Astronomical Society (AAS) congratulates you on the successful launch and deployment of this amazing technological advance in space observatories. We are all excited about the science that will come from JWST as it has long been one of the top mission priorities of the field we represent and serve. But we also are concerned about the way our field, its funders, and our missions reflect principles of inclusion and public engagement. For this reason, I am disappointed to have not received a reply from you to my first letter.

The lack of a response, combined with your dismissal of concerns raised by members of the astronomical community as "accusations of those in the gay community" (as you were quoted by Axios on October 26, 2021), is troubling. The AAS Board of Trustees shares the concerns of our LGBTQ+ members about the process NASA undertook to select the JWST name and the subsequent lack of rigorous investigation and reporting on Webb's involvement in the Lavender Scare.

My earlier letter requested you to appoint an independent historian with a background in LGBTQ+ history to conduct an investigation of Webb's activities relating to the Lavender Scare when COVID-19 restrictions on archive access permit. The National Archives are now accessible to researchers by appointment, https://www.archives.gov/research/news/faqs-research-room-reopenings. Webb's role in the Lavender Scare must be properly understood. In addition, Webb's role in the arrest and firing of NASA employee Clifford L. Norton and the subsequent lawsuit (Norton v. Macy, 1969) while Webb was NASA Administrator should all be examined. The investigation results should then be made public. These actions would help to ameliorate the now significant concerns in the astronomical community about NASA's commitment to equity, inclusion, and transparency.

My November letter also expressed our membership's misgivings about the naming process for this telescope. We feel it is important that NASA establish, describe, and commit to policies and procedures for naming its missions going forward. This should include an articulation of what

criteria qualify a name for consideration. The JWST situation illustrates the problems with choosing names with no transparency or input from the scientific community and the taxpaying public.

We request that you implement a rigorous naming process retroactively for JWST following policies and procedures as described in the preceding paragraph. This process might result in a name change, or not. Importantly, it would address the initial problem of one NASA Administrator *unilaterally* choosing a name to honor another Administrator and would reinforce NASA's commitment to applying consistent standards incorporating community input and values. This step would go a long way toward rebuilding trust broken with members of the U.S. astronomical community and the public.

We look forward to the science that will be coming from this great telescope, and we hope that the discoveries will not be clouded by a continuing reluctance by NASA to recognize and address its past history with sexual and gender minorities. Memorialization is important because it expresses a nation's values. The current name of JWST, as chosen unilaterally and without community input, does not reflect NASA's core value of inclusion. As I'm sure you will agree, science and society are necessarily entwined; scientists and institutions like NASA should work together for the benefit of the public. The AAS stands ready to assist you in doing so.

Sincerely,

Paula Szkody
President, American Astronomical Society

Cc: Jolene Meidinger-Sims, Deputy Director, Office of Agency Council Staff; Thomas Zurbuchen, Associate Administrator SMD; Paul Hertz, Division Director Astrophysics