

Park service says no to church picnic

Denial of request to hold event at Pearson leads organizers to cancel

By [Tom Vogt](#)

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Organizers of the county's All Church Picnic have called off this year's event.

Ryan Hurley, president of Detour Ministries, said plans to hold the fourth annual event on July 29 on the grounds of Pearson Air Museum were canceled after the National Park Service denied their permit request.

Pearson Air Museum is within the footprint of the park service's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site. However, the nonprofit Fort Vancouver National Trust has the sole fiscal and operational responsibility for the museum.

The city had already issued a permit for the picnic, said Elson Strahan, president and CEO of the National Trust. At that point, picnic organizers figured the 2012 picnic was going to be business as usual, Hurley said.

In previous years, "We had never been asked to contact the National Park Service, nor had we been contacted by the National Park Service," Hurley said.

"Unfortunately, the event had not been reviewed or authorized by us" in previous years, said Tracy Fortmann, superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

After park administrators expressed their concerns upon learning about previous events, "The city was kind enough to inform us about (this year's) event," she said.

When park administrators did contact picnic organizers, "It was a surprise to us," Hurley said. "It came very late in the game."

At that point, Strahan said he was still confident that the event would take place as planned.

"We thought that a discussion would enable them to come to a meeting of the minds," Strahan said. That obviously didn't happen, he said.

Hurley forwarded a document from Chief Ranger Greg Shine that explained the application denial. The proposed picnic "does not meet the regulations or policies that the Park is required to follow," it read. A special event may be permitted, the document continued, when "there is a meaningful association between the park area and the event, and ... the event will contribute to visitor understanding of the significance of the park area. We don't believe that this proposed event meets either of these criteria."

Strahan maintains that a religiously themed event is historically appropriate; he cited a series of ministries and religious activities at or near Fort Vancouver in the 1800s.

The park service also offered several adaptations that would help the picnic organizers meet NPS requirements. They included several items that would completely change the nature of the event, Hurley said.

One adaptation was eliminating amplified music or moving the sound system into the museum's hangar building, which seemed to be a deal-breaker.

"We didn't get past amplified sound," Shine said. "Unfortunately, we didn't work on the other items."

The other items included moving any prayer-related activities to a designated First Amendment area, relocating ministry information booths to the First Amendment area, and reducing the number of participants.

Other adaptations included eliminating sales booths, including food vendors; and eliminating recreation features such as dunk tanks, pony rides and inflatable bounce houses.

Strahan said that many of the events and activities featured in the NPS-sponsored Get Outdoors Day at Fort Vancouver would not meet those standards.

"The conditions were not something I did arbitrarily," Shine said. "They were reviewed by my superintendent, also at the Department of the Interior's solicitor's office, and at our Pacific West regional office."

As far as the church picnic goes, "choosing another location at this late date is not feasible," Hurley said, so it was canceled.

This is the second time in three weeks that the NPS has denied a permit for an event that had already been scheduled. In June, a youth soccer fair relocated to Hudson's Bay High School.

That incident drew a sharp response from U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas. In a letter that also was distributed to the media, she told park officials that they were "choking off public access."