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Museum From Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

Submitted by [Kurt Repanshek](#) on March 13, 2013 - 3:11am



In Washington state, a dispute over the National Park Service's authority at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site has led a congresswoman to introduce legislation to remove a museum and seven acres of land from the park.

The legislation, introduced February 14 by U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, stems from the Park Service's decision not to cede control over how the Pearson Air Museum is managed and what activities are permitted on its grounds. A hearing on the bill before the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands is scheduled for this Thursday.

The dispute at Fort Vancouver NHS, a site established in 1948 to preserve a fur-trapping outpost from the early 1800s and which gained an airfield, Pearson, in 1972 from the City of Vancouver, has been simmering for at least a year. While the Park Service in the past had contracted with the city to operate the facilities at Pearson Museum, the city in turn subcontracted those duties to the Fort Vancouver National Trust, a non-profit organization. At issue has been the Trust's desire to rent out the museum and its grounds for activities, such as a youth soccer fair and a day-long picnic involving dozens of church groups, that conflict with the historic site's mission and Park Service regulations and policies on what activities are appropriate for a unit of the National Park System to host.

"I think we tried diligently to work through a lot of issues. ... The Park Service enters into partnerships, into agreements, with entities that support the mission of the National Park Service, and that feel comfortable. Partnerships are about having shared goals, common ground to work from, and shared missions," Superintendent Tracy Fortmann said Monday during a phone call. "They wanted to see perhaps a committee that would make decisions on national park land, and

that was not something that we could comply with. ... They did not support the special use permit process that we go through."

Park Service officials all the way up to the Pacific Region Office have met with city and Trust representatives to negotiate a solution. However, the Trust broke off those talks January 10, saying it was entrepreneurial, and program- and community oriented while the Park Service is focused on its core mission.

"The Trust cannot operate effectively as the manager of the Museum for the benefit of the broader community and comply with those rules," wrote Ed Lynch and Bing Sheldon, co-chairs of the Trust. "This is not a match. It will not work."

When park officials gave the Trust 45 days to transition out of the museum, and 180 days to move their exhibits out, they sparked a backlash that included the congresswoman's bill aimed at cleaving the Pearson Air Museum out of the park, and creation of a [Facebook page to protest the decision](#).

On Wednesday, Elson Strahan, the Trust's president and chief executive officer, said key to the dispute was the Trust's view that the museum and surrounding grounds were made possible through community's donations -- the city of Vancouver built the museum -- and should be operated with the community's best interests in mind.

"Our position is that the community in good faith simply asked the Park Service to restore the museum and actually enhance the programming at the museum, and did so through a cooperative agreement and never dreamed that the Park Service ultimately was going to claim that the museum was their's," Mr. Strahan said during a phone call. "Yes, the Park Service owned the seven acres of land for which they had paid the city \$7,300 an acre, but the supposition was that since this was a partnership park that this would be a community-based asset. And that it was developed as such.

"... The community really regards this as their backyard, if you will," he continued. "It's a very, very active site from that standpoint. The whole issue of events, seemingly to us, was just an excuse for the Park Service to really appropriate the community-funded museum, is really what it came down to.

U.S. Rep. Herrera Beutler's staff has not returned a phone call seeking comment, but a June 2012 letter she has [posted on her website](#) took exception to the park's denial of permission to hold allow the Trust to permit a Youth Soccer Fair and a church picnic involving 100 churches on the museum grounds.

"... the Washington State Youth Soccer Association submitted a timely permit application to hold its Youth Soccer Fair dedicated to involving children in healthy outdoor recreational activities. This application was denied due to the impact vendor booths and planned activities would have on the site, yet the NPS's own 'Get Outdoors Day,' an event with a similar footprint, was approved for June 9," the Republican wrote. "Your denial of the All Church Picnic -- an annual event at the Pearson Air Museum involving more than 100 churches and organizations that draws

thousands of Clark County residents -- was particularly disappointing and seemingly unwarranted."

Park officials wrote a five-page letter in response to the congresswoman to outline the conflicts with some of the programs the Trust wanted to stage on at the national historical site.

In short, wrote Superintendent Tracy Fortmann, "Fort Vancouver National Historic Site is many things, but it is not a special events venue -- it is a national park that may permit special events under special circumstances. ... While many types of special events may have a meaningful association with Fort Vancouver National Historic Site's purpose, many do not require a national park setting, and we look to the many other community resources to accommodate them. In the meantime, the national park remains open and accessible to all, consistent with laws and policy."

Greg Shine, the park's chief ranger, said Monday that, in regard to the soccer fair, the historic site was not an appropriate or safe setting for that event, while the city's soccer complex "not 50 yards" from the park was well-suited for it.

"It was kind of a round peg in a square hole that this organization, the Trust, was trying to force through in an area where they thought they were able to control the activities that went on there, and they wanted that and they wanted the income that that event brought," said Chief Shine. "That wasn't a fit for (the national park's grounds). It's not a manicured soccer field. There are gopher holes, there are archaeology digs, there is broken glass. It is an area that is not for kids to be playing soccer, and we're lucky that there is a place directly adjacent that is."

The church picnic, meanwhile, would have brought a *Jumbotron* screen and stage onto the grounds for a day-long amplified concert, he added.

What perplexes Trust officials, however, is that the Park Service seems to make arbitrary decisions on what can and cannot be conducted at the national historic site.

While the Youth Soccer Fair, which Mr. Strahan characterized as merely an event to sign youth up for a soccer program, was denied access to the park, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics held its national cross-country championships at the historic site last November, he said. As for the church picnic, he noted that the Park Service in 2004 allowed "a 150th anniversary church service, full church service and picnic, for the First United Methodist Church that was held in the meadow right next to the parade ground."

"There's just very inconsistent application of standards," said Mr. Strahan.

Frowning on Rep. Herrera Beutler's efforts to wrest the museum and surrounding landscape from the Park Service is the National Parks Conservation Association.

"Basically we believe the park has the authority to permit those activities that they feel are appropriate for the historic nature of the site, and to deny those events that do not fit the character of the site," said David Graves, NPCA's Northwest program manager. "We don't think

it's appropriate for Congress to step in and take away part of a park to punish them for a decision they made that is their prerogative.”