

UPDATE: Herrera Beutler introduces bill to transfer Pearson Air Museum to city



Photo by [Zachary Kaufman](#)

The National Park Service has terminated an agreement with the city of Vancouver, putting Pearson Air Museum under management of the park service's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

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[Herrera Beutler's Pearson Bill](#)



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Vivian Johnson

Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler R-Camas

Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, introduced a bill Thursday to transfer ownership of Pearson Air Museum and the surrounding land from the National Park Service to the city of Vancouver.

The bill, introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, would transfer seven acres from the Park Service to the city so the museum can reopen under management by the Fort Vancouver National Trust.

Following introduction, the bill will be referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources, and hopefully pass through the committee and get to the house floor soon, Herrera Beutler said.

“For my part, I’m trying to get it through as quickly as possible,” Herrera Beutler said. “The first big step was getting it introduced.”

If the bill is approved, the museum and land would switch from the Park Service to the city through a land convergence procedure — which would require the city or trust to pay a minimal fee, she said.

“It’s basically a government-to-government transfer, and there’s fees attached with it,” Herrera Beutler said. “The city and the trust have talked about covering it through donations or in other ways. From what I understand, it’s not a cost-prohibitive deal.”

Casey Bowman, who works for Herrera Beutler, added that “the amount will be determined by the Congressional Budget Office after the bill has passed through the committee hearing process and before it is considered on the House floor. It’s not possible to pin down a figure at this time, but in other land conveyances, the CBO scores the figures as ‘not significant.’ ”

The museum shut down Feb. 6 as conflicts came to a head between the National Park Service, which owns the land and building, and the Fort Vancouver National Trust, which has operated the museum for the city of Vancouver for several years.

The service and the trust had differing notions on how the museum should be managed.

The service wanted the museum and event scheduling to be under the control of the superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, with a strong focus on history.

The trust wanted to continue to run it as a community and educational site.

On Feb. 3, the National Park Service officially gave the museum 45 days to transition to new management. But the Park Service also told Pearson staff it wanted the keys and security codes by Feb. 6.

So the trust, which either owns or has secured loans for all the planes and exhibits inside the museum, decided to move the contents to new locations rather than risk handing private property over to the Park Service.

For now, the museum is essentially empty, and its fate remains uncertain. Many events, including the Aviation Resource Fair scheduled for Feb. 16, have been put on hold or canceled due to the situation.

“I think we all were hoping this wouldn’t reach a legislative level,” Herrera Beutler said. “There is still a chance that they can work something out. If it doesn’t work out, then we have this bill.”

Tracy Fortmann, superintendant of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, said she couldn’t comment on the bill.

“It is the policy of the National Park Service not to comment on pending legislation,” Fortmann said Thursday.

In a new Frequently Asked Questions section on the Park Service website at <http://www.nps.gov/fova/parkmgmt/pamops2013.htm>, the service said it made the decision to take over the museum because: “components of some events that the trust wanted to allow were prohibited by federal law, regulation and policy to occur on National Park Service land. The National Park Service and trust worked in good faith for many months last year to establish a new cooperative agreement for the museum operation, but the parties’ objectives were too divergent.”

The service said it concluded its agreement with the city on Feb. 1, 2013.

“The National Park Service recognized that the transition of the museum’s operation could not happen instantaneously, and provided the trust with a 45-day window within which operations would transition to the National Park Service. In addition, the trust was given 180 days to identify and relocate its private property, consistent with the concluded agreement,” the FAQ site says.

But the agreement between the service and the city began in 1995 and was supposed to continue until 2025, said Elson Strahan, president of the trust.

In an email to The Columbian, Strahan also noted that the park service’s restrictions on specific events seemed to be arbitrary.

“Specifically, we were going to allow the All Church Picnic, USO benefit concert, and the Night of the Patriot (a benefit concert for veterans) but the NPS would not issue them a permit,” he said. “NPS will say they did not deny the events, but they placed so many restrictions on the events that they were not viable.”

Strahan said the park service wouldn’t allow the two concerts “because the music was deemed to destroy the tranquility of the site. We disagreed. After all, the site is bordered by a highway, freeway and a rail line. It is under the flight path of the Portland International Airport, and, of course, we have an airfield on the site which has a runway that is, parallel to the entire length of the Fort palisade. It is a wonderful environment, but far from tranquil.”

He added that the service denied the picnic because “the event had no historical context at the site, despite the fact that the first sermon in the region was delivered on Hudson’s Bay Company grounds and the Catholic, Episcopalian and Protestant Churches in the area originated on this site. Further, the NPS also found it to be unsuitable because it had too much impact on ‘sensitive archeological grounds’ (due to 3,000 people being on the site that day).”

In contrast, the service hosts about 35,000 people on the site during the annual Independence Day celebration, he said.

Asked about the All Church Picnic, Fortmann said “We were in the process of trying to work with them. That process did not continue. That was the choice of the applicant.”

She said the service was trying to work with the organizers to craft an event that was acceptable when the group canceled.

Strahan noted that the Park Service also approved the NAIA National Cross Country Championships for fall 2012 and “the course was laid out over the entire parade ground and meadow in the heart of the historic site where the NPS has, of course, stressed to be of great archeological sensitivity.”

During that event last fall, the park service drove 407 6-inch spikes into the ground to hold up flag strings.

“In addition, there were 126 “T” fence posts that were driven 10” to 12” inches in the ground. There were also 14 tents, including four of the 20’ x 20’ tents, and all were stabilized with large tent stakes, 12” metal tent stakes for the large tents,” Strahan said.

The Park Service FAQ site also says that: “Since 1998, the National Park Service has provided more than \$1,300,000 in funding support to the Museum and its immediate environs. Funding has been used for a wide range of activities including creating exhibits, painting, and constructing restrooms compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.”

According to a 2008 report by the city, funds to support the museum site from 1995 to that date were: \$3.9 million in private, city and state funds, \$324,362 from the Department of the Interior, \$80,900 from the Park Service to paint the hangar’s south wall for a total of about \$4.3 million.

“The NPS does not support operations (never has), while the annual operating budget for the Museum is over \$300,000,” Strahan said. “The Trust is responsible for operating budget, although the city has assisted in the past with maintenance and utilities. Accordingly, we estimate that from 1995 until now, the community has brought in resources of at least \$8 million for capital and operating support.”

The Park Service may be counting money from the Department of Interior and money the service spent on hangar removal and development of the Spruce Mill Trail, but overall, “the community has put substantially more in the Museum than has the NPS,” Strahan said.

Asked for her take on the situation, Herrera Beutler said “I’m not going to get into anybody’s personalities — I just think they’ve reached an impasse.”

She added, though, that the Park Service takeover “has kind of been dictatorial. It seems that way.”

Ultimately, the important thing is to get the museum back up and running, she said.

“Everybody’s got valid points on every side, but this is a unique model that should be protected,” Herrera Beutler said. “It’s disappointing that it could take an act of congress to resolve this.”

So far, much of the community seems to be supporting the trust. Groups have organized to picket and put together petitions to fight the change on [Facebook](#). On Thursday morning, the page had gathered close to 1,200 “likes.”

“I’m not going to sit by if a national agency is not willing to work with my constituents,” Herrera Beutler said. “This is a treasure for our region and I want it to continue on.”

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