

All Church Picnic moving to Esther Short Park

Relocation follows tussle with park service over permit

By [Tom Vogt](#)
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After a one-year hiatus, Clark County's All Church Picnic is back in business at a new spot, Esther Short Park.

This year's celebration of faith, fun and fellowship will be on Sunday, Aug. 4, at Vancouver's downtown public square.

The picnic drew more than 3,000 people from 75 local congregations the last time around, in 2011. Another edition was on the schedule a year ago for the Pearson Air Museum, but the 2012 picnic became part of a dispute between the National Park Service and a local nonprofit that had managed the museum.

While Esther Short Park wasn't their first choice, "We're really excited about having it there," said Ryan Hurley, one of the organizers.

There will be a couple of differences with the move. There won't be any sales booths in conjunction with the picnic this time.

"We've eliminated vendors," said Hurley, founder and director of Detour Ministries.

The weekend Vancouver Farmers Market will be going on at the same time.

"This year, we won't compete. The weekend market will get 3,000 more people looking at their stuff," Hurley said.

The group is renting the entire park, which has a listed capacity of 6,500 people.

The picnic scheduling brings closure to part of a simmering dispute that's involved a prominent religious-freedom advocacy group.

The All Church Picnic started as an annual event in 2009 but hit a regulatory wall during the run-up to the fourth event. The first three picnics were held at Pearson Air Museum, which had been managed until recently by the Fort Vancouver National Trust on behalf of the city. However, the museum grounds belong to the Park Service's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, which took over management of the museum in February.

"Last year, about 30 or 40 days before the picnic, we were notified that the National Park Service required a permit. We hadn't been required in previous years," Hurley said. "We did fill it out, and were immediately notified that a number of aspects were not permitted. We tried to work it out; pretty much everything about our event didn't meet their allowances."

The Liberty Institute separately represented both Detour Ministries and the Fort Vancouver National Trust in discussions with the Park Service. The Texas-based Liberty Institute describes its mission as "defending and restoring religious liberty across America."

Hiram Sasser, a Liberty Institute attorney, said that "the National Park Service folks are engaging in unconstitutional religious discrimination" in rejecting the picnic permit.

"I've been doing this for 11 years, and have never seen more made-up nonsense by government officials to justify their religious discrimination," Sasser said.

Sasser said he's walked around the Pearson-Fort Vancouver site and has a much different perspective on it than Park Service officials.

"What's so jarring is that they're treating it like the middle of Yellowstone, and I equate it to Central Park in New York City," Sasser said in a telephone interview.

Detour Ministries and the Trust also were represented pro bono by the WilmerHale law firm, said Elson Strahan, CEO and president of the Fort Vancouver National Trust.

In an email, Strahan said that "the Trust is pleased that the All Church Picnic organizers will be able to hold their event this year at Esther Short Park, although we are sorry that the families attending the picnic will miss the opportunity to enjoy the Fort Vancouver National Site."

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