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## **Congressional hearing on Pearson draws strong criticism of Park Service**

**Rep. Herrera Beutler leading effort to transfer ownership of museum to city of Vancouver**



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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Columbian Staff Reporter

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## [HR 716](#)



### 117TH CONGRESS 1st Session

## H. R. 716

To direct the Secretary of the Interior to convey certain Federal land to the City of Vancouver, Washington, and for other purposes.

### IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

First one-third

By Mr. Strahan (Republican of Washington), with amendments printed in Senate Report 1037, which was ordered by the Committee on Natural Resources.

### A BILL

To direct the Secretary of the Interior to convey certain Federal land to the City of Vancouver, Washington, and for other purposes.

- 1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives*
- 2 *of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*
- 3 **SECTION 1. LAND CONVEYANCE.**
- 4 The Secretary of the Interior shall convey, for ac-
- 5 quirement, to the City of Vancouver, Washington, the
- 6 Pioneer Aviation Museum complex, including the main
- 7 and historic hangars, headquarters, and auxiliary build-
- 8 ings, and the approximately 7-acre complex site, as de-
- 9 scribed in the document titled "Dispositive Agreement
- 10 Between the City of Vancouver and the United States of

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## Document

## [Frost testimony](#)

STATEMENT OF HERBERT C. FROST, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NATURAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 716, A BILL TO DIRECT THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONVEY CERTAIN FEDERAL LAND TO THE CITY OF VANCOUVER, WASHINGTON, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

March 16, 2019

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior regarding H.R. 716, a bill to direct the Secretary of the Interior to convey certain Federal land to the City of Vancouver, Washington.

The Department strongly opposes the enactment of this legislation. H.R. 716 requires the conveyance to the City of Vancouver of seven acres of Federal land within the boundaries of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, including the park's main historic hangars, headquarters, and auxiliary buildings. Such a conveyance threatens the values and resources of the National Historic Site. We believe that continued management of this Federal land by the National Park Service would be the best way to ensure the protection of the park's nationally significant cultural resources in perpetuity and to continue to provide top-quality education and interpretation of its unique history.

The Federal land within the boundaries of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site that would be conveyed to the City of Vancouver under H.R. 716 includes the Pioneer Air Museum complex, which contains the main hangar and three historic structures dating to World War I or before. The Federal land also includes archeological sites associated with the Hudson's Bay Company multi-cultural fur trade post, containing remnants from many indigenous peoples, the early U.S. Army Vancouver Barracks, and early Army aviation history tied to Popoian Field. These resources would be transferred to the City of Vancouver, Washington, without consideration, with the City of Vancouver paying only the cost of construction.

Retaining this property under Federal ownership would also ensure Federal protections under cultural resources preservation laws such as the National Historic Preservation Act, the Archeological Resources Protection Act, the National Antiquities Act, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Fort Vancouver National Monument was authorized by Congress in 1948 and established in 1958 to preserve cultural resources associated with, and to tell the story of, colonial fur trading, American settlement, and U.S. Army history in the Pacific Northwest. In 1981, the authorized boundaries were expanded to include adjacent areas and the park designation was changed to Fort Vancouver National Historic Site. In 1972, the National Park Service purchased a 77-acre parcel of land within the boundary of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site from the City of Vancouver, which included the Pioneer Air Museum complex. While there are over a dozen general aviation airports in the Northwest, the place-based history of Popoian Field makes the Pioneer Air Museum complex a unique nationally significant part of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

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## [Strahan testimony](#)



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Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas

A congressional hearing about the situation at Pearson Air Museum drew strong criticism of the National Park Service by members of the House Natural Resources Committee.

HR 716, introduced by U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, would transfer ownership of Pearson Air Museum and the surrounding 7 acres from the Park Service to the city of Vancouver. The Public Lands and Environmental Regulation Subcommittee heard testimony on it and two other bills at the Thursday meeting in Washington, D.C.

At the meeting, the subcommittee chairman, Rep. Rob Bishop, a Utah Republican, called testimony by Herbert C. Frost, associate director of Natural Resource Stewardship and Science for the Park Service, “a mass of platitudes.”

“All the complaints that are written in your testimony are silly,” Bishop told Frost at the meeting. “You should be ashamed.”

The discussion mostly revolved around the Park Service’s seemingly arbitrary criteria for events at the site and the breakdown of negotiations for a contract to run the museum among the Park Service, the city of Vancouver and the Fort Vancouver National Trust, which had managed the site for the city since 2005.

Frost told the panel that if the Park Service turned the land over to the city, archaeological resources on the 7 acres would no longer be protected and wouldn't have the same oversight.

"This bill would create a nonfederal area within the boundaries of the park," Frost said. "These adjacent sites would be managed by different entities according to different standards for resource protection and special events management and would create not only confusion for the public but also friction in their management."

He said the Park Service had been lenient with the trust in the past over what events should be allowed at the museum and that the clamping down on specific events in the past year had been an effort to remedy the situation.

"It just sort of ramped up over time," Frost said, adding that in the past year, the Park Service "held the line" on event restrictions.

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site Superintendent Tracy Fortmann was not present at the hearing.

When asked by The Columbian if she had been invited to testify at the hearing, Fortmann simply replied "no."

She also declined to comment on statements by officials at the meeting.

"The testimony is the National Park Service's position," she said of the written testimony submitted to the subcommittee by Frost.

Discussions between the Park Service and the trust broke down earlier this year in a dispute over who would manage the site. The Park Service wanted the museum and event scheduling to be under Fortmann's control, with a strong focus on history, and the trust wanted to continue to run it as a community and educational site.

Elson Strahan, president of the trust, told the subcommittee he was puzzled at Park Service decisions to not allow events such as concerts to benefit the USO and military veterans when the Park Service allowed similar or larger events on the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

"We are puzzled by the issue of relevance and scale," Strahan said in regards to what he called "arbitrary" enforcement of rules.

Frost said the Park Service had tried to work with the trust and city on a cooperative agreement to run the site.

"I think we are fully invested in private-public partnership," Frost told the subcommittee.

Herrera Beutler and others on the panel disagreed with that statement.

“The message to the trust has been: ‘You are not partners. You are vendors,’” Herrera Beutler said. She added that she felt the Park Service “has resisted efforts” to negotiate with the city and the trust.

Frost said partnership would be “a better situation on many different levels.”

But Herrera Beutler said the Park Service had failed to reach out to the trust or the city in the past month since the trust turned the museum over to the Park Service on Feb. 6.

“I’m hearing partnership, partnership, partnership; but your actions speak so much louder than your words,” Herrera Beutler said.

In his written testimony, Strahan said he’s sad the situation has deteriorated to the point where it requires a legislative fix.

“It is very disappointing that it came to this. While the partnership between the NPS, the city and the trust was successful for many years, the relationship between the NPS and the trust recently began to inexplicably deteriorate, and the trust’s executive committee could not understand why,” he wrote.

Asked what specific archaeological resources might be threatened if the Park Service turned ownership of the land over to the city, Frost said, “There is a Native American cemetery that is right adjacent to those 7 acres.” He also spoke of the larger archaeological footprint of the National Historic Site.

Bishop, unimpressed by the explanation, then told Frost that “when you’re in a hole, you should just quit digging.”

Pressed for details on specific things actually on the land, with a clarification by Bishop that “I don’t want to hear any crap about viewsapes and noisescapes,” Frost again spoke generally about “archaeological resources.”

In response, Bishop stopped asking questions and entered a statement into the record.

“This is not about policy, this is about personality,” he said, accusing the Park Service of arrogance.

He said other bills on the agenda included similar actions by the Park Service in other sites around the country.

Of Pearson, Bishop said: “This should have been solved at the local level years ago.”

Rep. Don Young, an Alaska Republican, was also critical of Park Service behavior at Pearson Air Museum and other sites at the meeting.

“The Park Service is badly managed with an arrogance that can barely be believe,” Young said.

The subcommittee didn't vote on whether to forward the bills to the House floor, but members noted during the discussion that it seemed likely.

After the meeting, Herrera Beutler said that she was pleased overall with what she heard during the hearing.

“It was heartening to see strong support for our bill from other members of Congress — including the subcommittee chair,” Herrera Beutler said. “I hope the Park Service got the message that stall tactics and empty gestures are unacceptable. With this bill gaining support and advancing through Congress, I remain determined to help rectify the current mess and restore the Pearson Air Museum to our community.”

Casey Bowman, a spokesman for Herrera Beutler, said he expects the subcommittee will hold another meeting on the bill soon.

“We are in conversations with the committee to schedule a mark-up, which would move the bill through the committee and to the House floor,” he said. “We are hopeful it can happen as soon as next month.”

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