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Park Service to go it alone at Pearson

Officials seek loans of historic aircraft; owners scoff



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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The National Park Service plans to reopen Pearson Air Museum "within a week" despite ongoing disputes between the service, the city of Vancouver and the Fort Vancouver National Trust.

On Tuesday, the service announced that "any individuals who own items formerly on display" can "loan them directly to the National Park Service so they can be returned to the hangar building for the reopening of Pearson as a free public museum."

That drew a laugh from Juan Brito, who had a historic 1945 L4 observation aircraft at the museum when it was operated by the trust.

"No way in hell," Brito said. "I guess that's the best way to put it. I wouldn't put something that's extremely valuable to me in the hands of somebody who has no respect for agreements."

The museum shut down on Feb. 6 as conflicts came to a head between the NPS, which owns the land and building, and the 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 Tracy Fortmann, the superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, with a strong focus on history. The trust, under president Elson Strahan, wanted to continue to run it as a community and educational site.

On Feb. 3, NPS 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.

The trust, which either owns or had 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.

Those items remain in storage and, for now, the museum's hangar remains mostly empty.

Inside the museum, the NPS has set up a living history display about the spruce mill that operated on the site and was the largest in the world during World War I. It plans to refill the museum with new exhibits, said Theresa Langford, curator of the museum for the Park Service.

"We want to reopen as soon as possible," Langford said. "We plan to do that within a week."

Langford added that she has had "a few conversations" with people who had items in the museum under the trust's management that "were very willing" to loan their items to the Park Service for display when the site reopens.

"We will definitely search out aircraft on loan from museums in the area or from our sister parks," she said.

Langford said aircraft could come to the site from Wright Brothers National Memorial, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site or Golden Gate National Recreation Area, where Fortmann once worked.

Brito, who works as a commercial pilot for a major airline, said he's doubtful that many of his fellow museum supporters who had loaned items to the trust would decide to move any items to a site managed by the service.

"The trust took everything out because they were in charge of those items, they were responsible for them, and what the Park Service did was just flat-out wrong," Brito said.

Strahan said he hasn't received any requests from individual donors to move anything back to the NPS-controlled museum.

"We have not had a single person request that we move their assets back to the Museum to be loaned to the NPS," Strahan said. "To the contrary, these and other individuals have expressly stated that they wanted the trust to safeguard the assets they have loaned to the trust and have forbidden us to put them under NPS control."

This week, the Park Service also sent out a release notifying the public that the site is open for events.

"The heart of Pearson remains," said Greg Shine, chief ranger at the National Historic Site. "That's the buildings and the land where history happened."

The service has already drawn a handful of events, including a change of command ceremony, a wedding and a Washington State University Vancouver digital culture class, he said.

"It's a valuable resource of the community, and it will be accessible," Shine said.

The decision to reopen the site didn't go over well with Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas.

Last week Herrera Beutler introduced a bill 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 of Vancouver so the museum can reopen under management by the trust.

"Rather than 'go it alone,' the Park Service should be working to bridge its differences with the trust and the city," said Herrera Beutler. "Reopening a shell of a museum doesn't solve the problem of diminished community access at Pearson. It's disappointing that the Park Service seems to place very little value on maintaining a partnership that worked very well for almost two decades."

The bill will be referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources, and if it passes through the committee will go to the house floor.

Part of the dispute between the trust and the Park Service has been that the service puts too many restrictions on certain events.

In a new section on the Park Service [website](#), 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."

Katlin Smith, president elect of the Vancouver Rotary Foundation and the marketing director of the annual Vancouver Rotary Foundation Festival of Trees, said the museum shutdown led to her

group's decision to move the event, which is planning its 18th year, to the Hilton Vancouver Washington.

"At this point we're set with the Hilton for the festival," Smith said. "Pearson as it was was a lovely facility for events. We hope the situation is fixed."

The space as it exists now isn't a big draw, she added.

"Using the space as an empty facility, it's hard to imagine," Smith said. "I'm not involved in any events that would be interested in that."

She said she was also concerned with some of the permitting issues that arose between the trust and the Park Service.

"We're committed to the Hilton this year," Smith said. "Once events leave a facility (like Pearson), it could impact the future of going back. It is stressful moving events around."

The trust has been helping groups that had events scheduled at the museum to find new locations. So far it has advised 45 event organizers and has passed along the Park Service information for the museum, Strahan said.

"We are unaware of any group opting to remain at Pearson, but that is certainly their choice," Strahan said. "We have already worked with most event organizers who have asked the Trust to assist them with moving their event to a location that will accommodate their needs. Some will go to the Artillery Barracks and the Red Cross Building, as well as the Howard and Marshall Houses, all of which are managed by Trust Staff. Several of the larger events have opted to go to other locations such as the Hilton, which is providing tremendous assistance."

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