

Herrera Beutler says Fort Vancouver restricting public access

Park officials' denial of permits for two events prompts letter

By [Tom Vogt](#)

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Different opinions about suitable use of Vancouver's national historic site have become public, with a lawmaker calling two recent decisions "unacceptable." Meanwhile U.S. Park Service officials say they must balance the issues of access and stewardship.

Officials at Fort Vancouver are choking off public access, U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, wrote Wednesday in a letter to Superintendent Tracy Fortmann.

The letter was prompted by park officials' decisions to deny permits for two events at Pearson Air Museum: a youth soccer festival Saturday and a county all-church picnic later this summer.

Those denials "suggest a desire to severely restrict public access to this valued community treasure," Herrera Beutler wrote. "This is unacceptable."

Fortmann said Wednesday afternoon that she was not able to comment publicly on specifics of Herrera Beutler's letter.

"We will respond directly with the member of Congress to address her concerns," Fortmann said.

But the park superintendent disagreed with a premise of the letter -- Herrera Beutler's suggestion that the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site was "choking off public access."

"We want people to come to this national park," Fortmann said. In her tenure as superintendent, Fortmann said, the annual visitor count has climbed from 345,000 a year to more than 1 million.

Many events at the historic campus, which includes the reconstructed fur trading post, the historic airfield and the former Army facilities, are managed through a partnership that includes the city of Vancouver and the nonprofit Fort Vancouver National Trust. The national trust had already approved the soccer festival and the all-church picnic, said Elson Strahan, president and CEO.

"The park service's view of appropriate utilization and the trust's view are really not in alignment," Strahan said Wednesday afternoon.

"At this point, the national park has taken a divergent path. We're saddened by

the direction that has been taken," Strahan said. "We remain committed to creating as much community access as possible."

The Southwest Washington soccer fair was able to find an alternate site Saturday at Hudson's Bay High School. Event organizer Ron Witherup said he really appreciated the quick turnaround by the city, the national trust and Vancouver Public Schools.

But Witherup doesn't agree with the park service's verdict that his event was inappropriate for Pearson Air Museum because of noise and commercial tie-ins.

"We're not doing anything that weddings and other events didn't do," said the Vancouver resident, who represents this region for Washington Youth Soccer. "I've been to numerous events in Pearson Air Museum where they're selling tons of stuff."

Meanwhile, the third annual Clark County All-Church Picnic might get another chance.

"We have reached out and are still ready to work with that organizer," Fortmann said.