

Air Museum dispute not the trust's first fight

Nonprofit group led by some of Vancouver's most influential residents, battle-tested executive



Photo by [Zachary Kaufman](#)

"We're trying to preserve the relationship as best as possible." Elson Strahan President and CEO of the Fort Vancouver National Trust, on the Park Service

By [Erin Middlewood](#)
Columbian Staff Reporter

Sunday, April 21, 2013



By Troy Wayrynen

The Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and Pearson Air Museum (behind the fort with striped roof) as well as the runways for Pearson Air Field.

The National Park Service's recent takeover of management at Pearson Air Museum from the Fort Vancouver National Trust generated protests, newspaper headlines and a congressional hearing on a bill that would, in effect, return the museum to the trust's operation.

Why all of this over a seemingly innocuous bureaucratic transfer?

Though a small nonprofit group, the trust is led by Vancouver's most influential residents and a battle-tested executive who knows how to orchestrate public opinion.

"We're just saying it's our museum," said Ed Lynch, one of the trust's founders.

The city of Vancouver has given the trust a great deal of power by contracting with the organization to not only manage Pearson Air Museum, but also Officers Row and other city-owned properties on the Fort Vancouver National Site.

The trust reported \$1.75 million in expenses and net assets of \$3 million in 2011, the most recent federal tax filings available. Due to the vagaries of tax forms for nonprofit groups, the filings understate the annual operating budget, which the trust pins at \$3.5 million.

But perhaps the best illustration of the trust's prominence may be CEO Elson Strahan's paycheck. In 2011, he received a salary of \$169,762 with an additional \$52,927 in benefits.

His salary is higher than that of Vancouver's city manager, as well as the heads of other major Vancouver-based nonprofit organizations, including the Community Foundation and the Columbia River Economic Development Council. It's also substantially more than Fort Superintendent Tracy Fortmann's federal salary of \$118,920.

Interest in history

Lynch, a retired construction executive, founded the Fort Vancouver National Trust with former Vancouver Mayor Bruce Hagensen in 1998. The organization is an outgrowth of another of their efforts, One Place Across Time, which they created in 1994 to expand the focus at Fort Vancouver beyond the history of the Hudson's Bay Co. in the early- to mid-1800s.

Lynch and Hagensen were interested in history at the site through World War II.

"The Park Service is renowned for focusing on their mission and that's what they think is important," Hagensen said. "We tried to change the dynamic."

The federal agency's narrow mission dismissed the importance of other notable history surrounding the fort, including the U.S. Army's presence and early aviation, Hagensen said. One Place Across Time sought to highlight these other aspects of the community's roots.

The museum rift unearthed long-standing grievances with the Park Service, which Hagensen detailed in a March 3 Columbian op-ed with another former mayor, Royce Pollard. "The recent confiscation of the M.J. Murdock Aviation Center/Pearson Air Museum Complex by the Park Service is perhaps the most flagrant example of deception and aggression by the NPS, but it is just one more incident in a long line of such experiences," he and Pollard wrote.

Local boosters of historic preservation efforts around Fort Vancouver have long seen the Park Service as an adversary, and some have been known to privately say they'd love to get rid of "those damn brown hats."

Pearson, then and now

The differences date back decades and center on Pearson -- both the airstrip and the museum.

The city sold 72 acres at the western end of Pearson Air Field to the National Park Service in 1972, anticipating that a new airport would be located somewhere else. That didn't happen. The city leased back the land to continue operating the airfield.

In the 1980s, Park Service officials complained that small planes buzzing around the airstrip interfered with the visitor experience at the reconstructed stockade. The original fur-trading post operated almost a century before the first plane touched down on the little strip on the north bank of the Columbia River. Park Service officials planned to let the city's lease at the airstrip expire in 2002 so they could incorporate the land into Fort Vancouver by planting crops that would have existed in the 1800s.

Aviation enthusiasts pleaded with the city council to fight for preservation of the airstrip. Hagensen took up the cause.

The creation of an air museum was part of aviation boosters' strategy to prove the airstrip's historical relevance at the site and convince the Park Service to renew the lease, which the agency ultimately did. In 2011, that lease was again renewed for another 40 years.

In 1995, the city signed an agreement with the Park Service to build an air museum on federal land. One Place Across Time and the city secured a grant from the Vancouver-based M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust to cover most of the \$3.4 million cost to create the Jack Murdock Aviation Center.

Community boosters who believed Pearson Field is part of a worthy chapter in American history advocated for congressional action that created the 366-acre national historic reserve. The legislation, signed by President Clinton in 1996, combined into one attraction the National Park Service's reconstructed stockade, as well Army barracks, a row of stately 19th-century officers' homes and Pearson Field.

The law also established a partnership among the city, state, National Park Service and the Army. The state hasn't been very involved and the Army has since relinquished ownership of the barracks. So that leaves the park service and the city as the only original partners still involved. And the city has effectively turned over its stake to the Fort Vancouver National Trust. The trust, in turn, has repeatedly clashed with the Park Service.

"If you talk to the Park Service, the trust's primary role is to raise money and donate that money to the Park Service," Strahan said.

In 2011, the trust gave the Park Service \$31,200 for educational programs. Although that's a tiny sliver of the trust's budget, it doesn't capture the nonprofit's full contribution, Strahan said. The trust helps the Park Service in a variety of ways, including grant writing, he said.

Strahan said the trust has been stymied even when it has offered help. A few years ago, the trust helped raise money for a planned \$4.8 million renovation of the Fort visitors center and bookstore, but the Park Service didn't come through with its share, so donations and grants had to be returned and the project was postponed indefinitely.

"There was a lot of heartache," said Fortmann, who took her post in Vancouver in 2000. "My job is to keep (the project) in play."

Williamsburg West

Even before that, however, the trust's goals went beyond fundraising for the Park Service.

Lynch envisions a complex to rival Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, which is operated by a private foundation.

"Our vision was to do everything we could to bring the total reserve up to full bloom," Lynch said. "We wanted to make it of zero problem or concern for the city -- that was the dream we had."

The trust has expanded its reach by taking on historical and patriotic efforts that the city could no longer afford with its tightening budget.

Vancouver asked the trust to manage Celebrate Freedom events, which include the annual Marshall Lecture and awards program. In 2004, the trust took over the annual Fourth of July event from a committee whose books had plunged into the red. In 2006, the city hired the trust to manage its Officers Row and barracks properties on the reserve.

In 2005, the city turned to the trust to operate the air museum when the Pearson Field Historical Society went under.

"The museum would have closed if we had not agreed to take it over," Strahan said. "We had to come in and clean up."

Mike True, the trust's chief financial and operations officer, said the museum costs \$300,000 a year to operate. He wouldn't provide a specific breakdown, which also isn't in public tax filings, but he said it takes a combination of money from the trust, the city, private contributions, revenue from a \$7 admission fee and rental of the facility to cover the bills. He said 35,000 people visit the museum annually, a figure that includes those attending private events.

"How does the park service benefit from the trust? If one of the goals is to bring people to the site, that's exactly what we're doing," True said.

However, some of the visitors proved to be disruptive to the park, at least according to the Park Service.

After an unexpectedly loud and large event at Pearson in 2010, Fish Fest, the Park Service became stricter about requiring the trust to obtain permits for events that spilled out of the building onto park grounds. The trust insisted it had the authority to host events at Pearson as it saw fit.

The city that year told the Park Service that, due to a budget crunch, it no longer wanted responsibility for Pearson Air Museum. That left the federal agency and the trust to work out a direct agreement. They couldn't come to terms, and the Park Service ended up assuming management of the museum in February. Strahan had his staff and volunteers immediately move exhibits out of the museum. The Park Service has since stocked the museum with new exhibits and reopened with free admission. The trust continues to operate the bookstore at Fort Vancouver, but an agreement for the trust to raise funds for the Park Service lapsed at the end of 2012.

"We're trying to preserve the relationship as best as possible," Strahan said.

The trust's rainmaker

This isn't Strahan's first battle. He earned a reputation as a rainmaker in his previous job as executive director of the Clark College Foundation, but he also butted heads with the institution his organization existed to support.

In 2000, then-Clark College President Tana Hasart wanted to inspect the foundation's books, but the agreement between the college and foundation limited her ability to do so. She complained the foundation was cutting deals with prospective donors without the college's buy-in. She and Strahan began negotiations for a new contract, but friction continued. Strahan moved the foundation's office and staff off campus. The foundation kicked Hasart off its board. The college's trustees fired Hasart in 2002.

Strahan left Clark in 2003 to become CEO of the trust.

He's polished, with crisp suits and a sleek coif, but those who have dealt with Strahan -- friends and foes alike -- also describe him as someone not to be crossed.

"He's sharp. He's a good man," said supporter Larry Lafady, who served as president of the Clark College Foundation board when Strahan was its director. "He surrounds himself with good, smart, strong people and they are not about to be bullied."

Strahan traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before a congressional committee in support of U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler's bill to transfer the 7 acres on which the museum sits from the Park Service to the city. In addition, Herrera Beutler is encouraging further negotiation between the Park Service and the trust.

With all the political pressure at play, the trust may yet run Pearson Air Museum again.

Erin Middlewood: 360-735-4516; erin.middlewood@columbian.com.