

In Our View: Harmony Needed at Fort

Disagreement over scheduling special events must be resolved soon

As of Thursday, June 21, 2012

Two of the greatest assets for this community and region are the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and the Fort Vancouver National Trust. Partnering with the city of Vancouver, they serve as stewards of more than two centuries of history, community outreach, countless public events large and small, and prized tourism offerings.

Our community does not need a splintered relationship between the historic site and the national trust, yet that appears to have happened over the scheduling of events. U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, recently sent a letter to the historic site describing as "unacceptable" the denial of permits for two events — a youth soccer festival and a county all-church picnic — at Pearson Field on the historic site. Sustaining Herrera Beutler's complaint was this comment from Elson Strahan, president and CEO of the national trust: "The park service's view of appropriate utilization and the trust's view are really not in alignment," he said Wednesday afternoon. "At this point, the national park has taken a divergent path. We're saddened by the direction that has been taken. We remain committed to creating as much community access as possible." In a subsequent email to The Columbian, Strahan added: "We are very disappointed in the recent position taken by the NPS with regard to these events."

Historic Site Superintendent Tracy Fortmann declined to comment on the specifics of Herrera Beutler's letter, noting, "We will respond directly with the member of Congress to address her concerns," while disagreeing with Herrera Beutler's contention that the historic site was "choking off public access."

We hope this is little more than a difference of opinion that can be easily fixed with clear communication among the historic site (and U.S. Park Service) officials, the national trust and Herrera Beutler. Clearly, a local entity cannot expect to unilaterally dictate how a federal agency sets policy. But by the same token, the park service should not allow this disagreement to fester. Guidelines for special events should be reviewed, and adjusted as necessary. Currently those guidelines can be viewed at [Fort Vancouver National Historic Site](#) (click on "Plan your visit," "fees and reservations," "Permits" and "Special Event Guidelines."

A good starting point for this communication process would be to focus on Fortmann's assurance: "We want people to come to this national park." To the park's credit, attendance has almost tripled during Fortmann's tenure to more than 1 million people annually.

But Herrera Beutler and Strahan make good points, too. The congresswoman wrote that recent permit denials "suggest a desire to severely restrict public access to this valued community treasure." If that presumption is incorrect, then Fortmann needs to precisely explain why.

The various venues affected by this disagreement are valuable. The historic site points out that the Picnic Shelter next to the Visitor's Center "provides a perfect venue for family gatherings,

birthdays and many other special events." The Great Meadow on the parade grounds is "a lovely place for a wedding reception, family reunion or any other large celebration," and the Bandstand is "a great staging area for your event."

Quick resolution of this matter is easily within reach. For the community's sake, the historic site, the national trust and city officials need to be singing loudly, proudly and harmoniously as soon as possible.