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Pearson Air Museum reopening draws ire of some Vancouver residents



By [Daniel Moran, The Oregonian](#)

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[View full size](#) Emily Gorchels and her daughter, Claire Gorchels, 3, explore a tent that is part of a new exhibit about a World War I era spruce mill at Pearson Air Museum. The museum reopened Wednesday under direction of the National Park Service. Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

Pearson Air Museum reopened Wednesday after a three-week hiatus following [a dispute between the museum's owner, the National Park Service, and its contract operator, the nonprofit Fort Vancouver National Trust.](#)

As residents trickled in for the museum's free reopening, reactions were mixed, with far more passionate responses coming from attendees who supported the trust.

"The integrity of this place has been completely usurped by the National Park Service," Vancouver resident Jan Kennedy said. "It's not an air museum any more."

Kennedy, 66, had been to the museum for events associated with the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, a Vancouver-based nonprofit. She said she was disappointed that events such as a retirement party for the trust's former executive director would not take place under the National Park Service's special events standards.

"It pretty much goes against the grain of people who put all the money in to support this thing," she said.

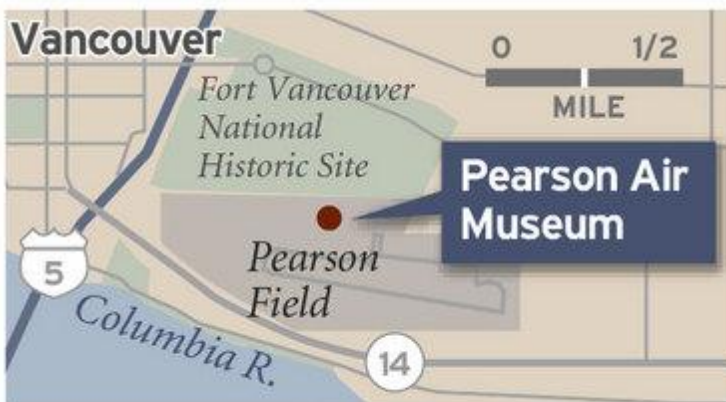
A small group of protesters formed outside the museum in the morning, echoing Kennedy's opinion.

James Beckelhiemer, a Vancouver resident who co-founded the Facebook group "Save Pearson Air Museum," called the National Park Service's control of the museum "a heavy-handed takeover of a community asset."

Beckelhiemer, 25, said he visited the museum throughout his childhood and would miss going to charity events and weddings there.

"This was community-built and community-run," said Beckelhiemer, whose group has over 1,300 online followers. "That's the whole point of a community center: to get the community to come out and use this great space to further us all."

Before the museum's closure, the hangar had been filled with airplanes tracing the history of aviation. The planes, which are either owned by or on loan to the Fort Vancouver National Trust, were moved into storage at a nearby hangar after the Park Service terminated its museum operation contract with the City of Vancouver on Feb. 1.



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The contract termination was the result of a dispute between the Park Service and the trust, which the city had hired to manage the museum. The dispute centered on special event planning at the museum. The trust had held fundraisers and events with loud music, which the Park

Service said was not consistent with its regulations. This led to a year of Park Service-led contract renegotiations that eventually failed.

Some aviation artifacts remain at the museum, most noticeably two old airplanes hanging from the museum's ceiling. The Fort Vancouver National Trust's president and CEO, Elson Strahan, said the trust had not had time to remove the remaining planes but would do so pending proposed federal legislation that could transfer control of the museum from the Park Service to the city.

U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash., submitted that bill to the House of Representatives on Feb. 12.

National Park Service superintendent Tracy Fortmann said the Park Service contacted community members who had loaned airplanes to the museum before they were moved to storage.

"We certainly respect people's decisions on if they're comfortable working with us or not," she said.

The museum's vast collection of aircraft has been replaced with two temporary exhibits curated by the National Park Service.



[View full size](#) A 1914 French light bomber plane is one of two aircrafts that remains at Pearson Air Museum. All other planes were moved into a storage unit three weeks ago. Fort Vancouver National Trust president and CEO Elson Strahan said it would cost \$9,000 to remove the remaining planes. Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

"We had to work from scratch," Fortmann said.

The first exhibit is dedicated to a spruce mill that operated on Fort Vancouver during World War I. The exhibit consists of two Park Service-owned tents set up to show the lives of soldiers at Fort Vancouver during the war.

The second exhibit, "Float, Drive, and Fly," is for children and is meant to show the history of transportation. It features a replica covered wagon, a replica of a boat used by George Vancouver in 1792, a steam-powered automobile from the early 20th century and a tractor.

There are also two projectors set up at opposing walls of the museum. On Wednesday morning, one showed a slideshow of archival photos relating to the spruce mill. The other was screening the 1990 movie "Memphis Belle," which revolves around a U.S. Air Force crew in England during World War II.

Greg Shine, National Park Service chief ranger and historian, said the Park Service was planning future exhibits. He also said local Park Service officials would reach out to other National Park Service locations, such as Golden Gate National Recreation Area, to acquire traveling exhibits.

The museum also has several panels of historical aviation information and murals dedicated to aviation history that have not been removed. But three wooden cases sat empty Wednesday, a reminder that former display items still sat in a storage facility.