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UPDATE: Air Museum reopens under new management



Photo by [Troy Wayrynen](#)

Visitors to the Pearson Air Museum were greeted by very different displays when the National Park Service reopened the facility Wednesday morning.

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)

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The Pearson Air Museum reopened under new management this morning — as a National Park Service facility.

Visitors to the museum, which had been closed for three weeks following a dispute between the NPS and the Fort Vancouver National Trust, were greeted with an odd assortment of exhibited items, including a steam-powered car, a Ferrari tractor, a covered wagon and a boat.

Those items were part of an interim display called "Float, Drive, and Fly," about the history of transportation at the site.

Another exhibit about a Spruce Mill and encampment, which made aircraft components at the site during World War I, included two large tents, some short videos and a display with some recovered artifacts.

Park Service officials said they realize there are a lack of airplanes in the museum, but they plan to remedy the situation as soon as possible. The "Float, Drive and Fly" exhibit was built over the course of about three weeks, said Theresa Langford, the museum's new curator.

"The interim exhibits we'll be having here for a few months, but the long-term plan is to get more planes here," she said.

Two planes still hang from the ceiling and have remained since the Park Service informed the trust that it was taking over. The trust, which owned or had secured loans of all the previous displays and historic airplanes, removed the others from the site before it shut down on Feb. 6.

The fate of those two planes is uncertain. The trust couldn't safely remove them from the site before the shutdown, but the Park Service hasn't yet learned whether the owners want to keep the planes with them or take them back, Langford said.

"The owners feel a little caught in the middle, and I can't say I blame them," Langford said. "I'm not sure if (the planes) are going to stay here yet."

A small but steady trickle of visitors continued to pass through the museum after the doors opened just before 10 a.m.

They were surrounded by an equal number of journalists and Park Service rangers.

Attitudes from the visitors mimicked how the controversy has split the community.

Asked for comment by The Columbian, one couple declined, with the man saying, "We don't want to talk to you. You've got your point. We've got ours."

Another woman, looking at panels along the museum's side walls, also refused to comment.

Elizabeth Grace, who lives in Portland, said she came to check out the museum for the first time on Wednesday morning because "there was so much hoopla, I wanted to see what the action was about."

Grace said she liked the displays.

"I think it's a really good space, and I don't really have any problems with The Park Service developing it," she said.

Paul Rogers, of downtown Vancouver, also said he enjoyed the displays.

"It's cool to see things that actually happened here," Rogers said. "For me, it's cool to see something different. I'm really fascinated by the Spruce Mill. The (Ferrari) tractor's kind of cute. I'm really into the local history."

Emotions also ran the gamut for the handful of protestors from the Save Pearson Air Museum group, which has organized through <https://www.facebook.com/SavePearsonAirMuseum>.

"Half the people (driving by) have been honking their support, half the people have been scowling at us, and one lady came out and she flipped us off," said Kelly Beckelhiemer, one of the organizers.

Museum operations under the trust enjoyed support from much of the local community. The site had been used for several special events — which the Park Service says it wants to continue — and the trust had also organized several outreach programs for youth in the area.

Protestors said they were especially unhappy with the short time span of about three days that the Park Service told the trust it had before handing over the keys and codes to the museum.

Vern Hartman, a retired Army aviator and one of the protestors, said he felt the Park Service decided to reopen the site to get an advantage should pending legislation from U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler go through. That legislation would turn the museum and surrounding 7 acres over to the city of Vancouver.

The trust had managed the site through a contract with the city.

"I think to me it looks like, 'We're here, so we get an advantage because we're here,'" Hartman said. "The federal government, they want something, and they just move in and they take it. It just doesn't make any sense."

The protestors said they plan to return on Saturday at around noon to continue their efforts to restore museum management to the trust.

Under the Park Service, the museum will follow the same schedule as before the closing — 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. Admission to Pearson Air Museum, 1115 E. Fifth St., is free.