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## City had asked for Pearson handover

Documents show intention to break agreement in 2010



Photo by [Troy Wayrynen](#)

Visitors to the Pearson Air Museum were greeted by very different displays when the National Park Service reopened the facility in Late February.

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Vancouver officials have protested as loudly as anyone about the National Park Service's takeover of Pearson Air Museum last month, yet two years ago they asked the federal agency to do just that, according to documents obtained by The Columbian.

In November 2010, at a time when the city was slashing its budget, City Manager Eric Holmes sent a letter to Fort Vancouver Superintendent Tracy Fortmann giving her notice that the city would end its 1995 agreement with the National Park Service to operate Pearson Air Museum.

In that letter, Holmes said the city would also end its contract with the Fort Vancouver National Trust to run the museum on the city's behalf.

The Park Service was prepared to take on the full cost of managing the museum, freeing the city of its financial obligation there.

"While we are laying off police officers and firefighters, closing fire stations and mothballing city parks, we can't continue to justify ongoing support of \$120,000 per year on utilities, grounds and building maintenance and program support for the air museum," Holmes wrote.

The Park Service has the resources and expertise to operate Pearson. But the Fort Vancouver National Trust did not want to cede a museum created through local efforts.

Persuaded by the trust to keep control of the museum, the city changed its mind last year. By then, it was too late. The federal bureaucracy's wheels were already in motion.

"That step we took in 2010 -- it really was one of the many cost-saving measures we took to preserve core services," Mayor Tim Leavitt told The Columbian. "It wasn't that we were no longer interested in the museum. We have full faith and confidence in the trust to operate it on behalf of the city."

The city, the trust and the National Park Service have a complicated relationship. The Park Service owns the museum buildings and the 7 acres on which they sit. Since 1995, the federal agency had contracted with the city to operate the museum.

A combined city and community effort raised money for a \$3.4 million renovation of the complex, a project completed in 1997.

In 2005, the city began subcontracting management of the museum to the trust, which is led by some of Vancouver's most influential residents. The trust also manages the city's other properties at the 366-acre Fort Vancouver National Site.

When city officials announced they were pulling out of the National Park Service agreement, they fully expected the federal agency would reach a direct agreement with the trust to manage the museum by Dec. 31, 2012, said Jan Bader, Vancouver's program and policy development manager. But the trust's relationship with the Park Service was already becoming strained over how the trust was using the museum.

The \$7-per-person admission fee didn't cover the \$300,000-a-year it took to run the museum, so the trust had been renting out the facility for 100 events a year.

As those functions got bigger and louder, the Park Service became stricter about requiring the trust to obtain permits for events that spilled out of the building onto park grounds.

The Park Service wanted authority over the museum's operations and the trust would not accept that, according to letters and emails released by the city under Washington's open records law.

The trust decided it would rather be a subcontractor for the city than for the Park Service. Trust CEO Elson Strahan sent a June 7, 2012, letter asking the city to keep the existing arrangement. In return, the trust pledged to cover the city's financial obligation at Pearson Air Museum.

Holmes sent another letter to Fortmann on June 15, 2012, stating that the city didn't want to end the agreement with the Park Service, after all.

By that time, however, the National Park Service had determined that the agency needed a direct contract with whoever would be operating the museum.

### **Impasse over events**

Despite behind-the-scenes efforts by city officials and U.S. Rep. Jaime Hererra Beutler's office to help the parties reach a compromise, talks broke down.

The trust had proposed establishing a committee to issue event permits. Fortmann wrote a Dec. 7, 2012, letter to Strahan explaining that Park Service attorneys determined such an approach wouldn't be legal.

The city and the Park Service both signed paperwork Feb. 1 that terminated their contract and required the city and the trust to vacate the museum within six months.

Holmes sent a letter that same day to Strahan expressing disappointment that the partnership was coming to an end. He thanked the trust for its work and suggested that there were "multiple avenues" that could be pursued to re-establish the arrangement.

"The city remains supportive of finding a way for the museum to continue running in a manner substantially consistent with past operations," he wrote.

Fortmann sent a Feb. 4 letter giving the trust 45 days to transition the operations to the Park Service, and a total of six months to remove the trust's property from the buildings. The letter asked for keys and security codes to the building by Feb. 6 so Park Service staff could work alongside trust staff during the transition.

Up until that point, the city had tried to remain a neutral mediator in the conflict between the Park Service and the trust, but the letter caught the city off-guard. The city called in its federal

lobbyist, Joel Rubin. On Feb. 5, he emailed the offices of Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell to advocate for transfer of the museum from the Park Service to Vancouver.

That same day, the trust packed up planes and collections to store in a hangar at Pearson Field, something Strahan had planned months earlier. In an email to City Councilor Larry Smith in September 2012, Strahan wrote that if the Park Service cancelled the agreement with the city, "the trust will remove all of its assets, including exhibits, and we expect donors who have exhibits on loan will follow suit. ... The museum, as created and sustained by the community, will no longer exist."

The Park Service believed the city owned most of the museum's contents and that they would stay in the building. The Park Service has since stocked the museum with other displays and reopened it with free admission.

The city's 2005 contract with the trust includes a provision returning all collections, displays and artifacts to the city, unless that conflicts with written direction from the donor. Strahan maintains the clause wouldn't apply, but he was concerned enough about the possibility that on Feb. 22 he emailed Steve Horenstein, an attorney and trust board member. Horenstein, in turn, emailed the city manager.

In his March 6 reply, Holmes wrote, "Just to be clear: The city is not interested in gaining ownership of a collection of artifacts or museum displays. However ... the city may have some degree of responsibility for assets that are under stewardship of the trust."

"My preference is that the city and trust work together to establish an inventory and chain of responsibility for these assets," Holmes continued. "I would fully anticipate this to take quite some time, as we don't want to rush the matter."

The city may ultimately find it necessary to take action, the mayor said.

"If it's appropriate for the city to step in to get those exhibits back to their rightful spot for public viewing," Leavitt said, "we'll take that step."

*Sue Vorenberg contributed to this report.*