

The Columbian

Group declines to help stock Pearson

Park Service effort to fill museum hampered by ongoing controversy



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.

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It's just not a good time to help the National Park Service build exhibits at Pearson Air Museum, said a local partner with a history of working with the agency.

The Park Service, which took over management of the museum under controversial circumstances last month, has been struggling to put together displays to fill the museum after the Fort Vancouver National Trust vacated the site on Feb. 6.

As part of that effort, Theresa Langford, museum curator for the Park Service, asked the Vancouver Barracks Military Association if it could help the agency create a temporary exhibit about Vancouver Barracks and the birth of Pearson Airfield.

"We had asked them to partner in putting more things in the space and they declined," Langford said. "We'll be using our own collection and the exhibit is still a go."

"The main concern of my constituency was the present-day uncertain situation at the Pearson Air Museum," VBMA President Jeff Davis wrote in an official response to the Park Service's request.

A bill introduced by U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, could change the Park Service's plan for the site -- giving management control and ownership of the museum and surrounding 7 acres back to the city of Vancouver and the trust, which had been operating the museum for several years.

When the trust vacated the museum, it took the previous displays with it, since the items inside were either owned or on loan to it and not to the Park Service.

If the trust returns, it will bring those exhibits back. And Park Service displays, which right now are focused on the history of transportation and on the historic spruce mill at the site, will have to move out.

"Some of my members were afraid that in a few weeks, if we loaned items, we might end up lugging stuff out again," Davis said.

The Park Service, which owns the land beneath the museum, took over management of the site after discussions broke down between the agency, the city and the nonprofit trust.

The Park Service wanted the city and trust to follow strict guidelines for events and place ultimate control for all actions under the authority of Tracy Fortmann, superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

The trust and city wanted to continue to collaborate to run the museum as a community educational resource and venue for a wide range of community and private events.

When the parties couldn't come to an agreement, the Park Service canceled its deal with the city, which was supposed to run through 2025.

Davis said some of his members were concerned that the Park Service could back out of other agreements on short notice.

"Yes, some of them did express that concern," Davis said.

One member also worried about the security of VBMA items under the Park Service, he said.

"Somebody mentioned that if our stuff was on loan in their museum, would we get keys, and how would the Park Service keep our items separate from theirs," Davis said. "That's not a concern I have, but it did come up."

The decision to say no to the invitation came from a consensus vote from VBMA's 12 members over the course of two meetings, he added.

Langford said she doesn't hold the decision against the group.

"We're not at all offended," Langford said. "It's a complex issue and I understand if they feel they've been caught in the middle."

For his part, Davis said he's enjoyed working with the Park Service in the past. VBMA, which is a nonprofit, all-volunteer group, has loaned displays to the Park Service on several occasions, he noted.

"We have this wonderful collection of artifacts we want to display, but it's just not the right time," Davis said. "There was regret we couldn't (help them). We're a museum without a building."