

Park service ends deal with Vancouver

Pearson Air Museum exhibits moving into Pearson Field hangar



Photo by [Zachary Kaufman](#)

The National Park Service has terminated an agreement with the city of Vancouver, putting Pearson Air Museum under management of the park service's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

By [Tom Vogt](#)

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Photo by Zachary Kaufman

A crowd attends an aerospace supply chain workshop at Pearson Air Museum on April 4.

The National Park Service has terminated an agreement with the city of Vancouver, putting Pearson Air Museum under management of the park service's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

The nonprofit Fort Vancouver National Trust has been operating the museum on behalf of the city.

The museum's historical artifacts and educational programs won't be going far, Elson Strahan, president of the national trust, said Monday afternoon.

The trust will move museum-owned exhibits and instructional assets, including a flight simulation lab, to hangar space at adjoining Pearson Field.

The agreement among the park service, city and trust was established in 1995.

"They terminated an agreement that was written to be put in place until 2025," Strahan said.

Tracy Fortmann, superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, said Monday that she intends to keep Pearson Air Museum open.

"We've identified a 45-day transition period, and I would like to see a seamless transition," Fortmann said. As far as museum operations go, "It's our intent to keep the same schedule."

It will be an empty building "because there's nothing in there the park service owns," Strahan said.

"The community built the museum and sustained the museum. The trust owns about half the planes (on display) and the other half are on loan to the trust," Strahan said.

The termination is the latest event in a disagreement over the role of a community-supported facility on a federally owned piece of property. Some of the disagreements went public in the past few months when the trust rented out Pearson Air Museum for events that had to be canceled. Permit applications for a youth soccer festival and a countywide church picnic were rejected by park service officials.

Without getting into specifics, "There were disconnects regarding use permits. There were challenges," Fortmann said.

Some activities "don't fit a national park setting," she said.

Strahan, however, cited a 1996 agreement establishing Vancouver's historic reserve to show it was intended to be a partnership. As a portion of the document stipulated, it "shall not be deemed to be a new unit of the National Park System."

Park service officials did draft an updated agreement. It gave the Fort Vancouver superintendent total control of all the museum's programs, events and activities.

"This provision is absolutely unacceptable," trust officials responded.

The trust has contracted for more than 100 events a year at the museum complex, Strahan said. Based on past experience, the park service can't process that many permits in a timely manner, he said.

The trust applied on May 1, 2012, for a permit to hold its July 4 event at Vancouver Barracks. The permit was approved on July 4, Strahan said.

"I believe both us and the trust expended tremendous energy and worked to find common ground," Fortmann said. However, the historic site is bound by the legal framework of the National Park Service, she said.

"I see no blame here," Fortmann said. "We still have a working relationship with the trust."

In a letter to Strahan on Friday, Vancouver City Manager Eric Holmes expressed disappointment in the termination.

One possible remedy to what Fortmann called "disconnects" might be available at the federal level, Holmes indicated. It would hinge on the local delegation helping get the museum and associated grounds an exemption from park service rules.

Holmes broke the news Monday to the Vancouver City Council, and councilors expressed hope that the Pearson Air Museum will remain open to the public. There are 45 community events scheduled over the next six months, Holmes said.

"I don't think it's overstating it to say this is shocking," said Mayor Tim Leavitt. "The trust has done an amazing job of providing it as a venue for community events."

The Pearson Air Museum needs to remain available for public use, Leavitt said. "This is potentially a significant loss to Southwest Washington."

Stephanie Rice contributed to this story.