

Pearson Air Museum packs up exhibits

Artifacts moved to nearby hangar ahead of takeover by park service



Photo by [Troy Wayrynen](#)

Joshua Staley, right, an A&P technician and event staff supervisor, helps direct Tom Sturdy, also an event staff supervisor, as he moves a 1941 U.S. Army Air Corps Ryan PT-22 airplane from the Pearson Air Museum hangar Tuesday.

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)

As of Tuesday, February 5, 2013



By Troy Wayrynen

Volunteer Daniel Canfield, left, and Fred Munhoven, a historical preservation specialist, load a training simulator into a moving truck at the Pearson Air Museum on Tuesday.



By Troy Wayrynen

Volunteer Marlin Martin tapes moving boxes at the Pearson Air Museum on Tuesday. Martin, a teacher for 40 years at ESD 112 and educator of the year in 1998, helps run the education program at Pearson.

The sound of packing tape stripped over boxes, the whirring of machines and the beeping of heavy trucks made a cacophonous symphony Tuesday at Pearson Air Museum as volunteers and employees worked feverishly to turn the facility over to the National Park Service on what they said was very short notice.

NPS officially gave the museum, run by the Fort Vancouver National Trust, 45 days to transition to ownership by the Park Service. But the agency, which owns the land and hangar but not the displays or planes, also told Pearson staff they were coming in by today.

It's a move that's caused quite a bit of shock and anger from volunteers -- and also from U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, and Vancouver City Manager Eric Holmes, who said they plan to fight the Park Service's efforts.

Short notice

"We received notice (Monday) by hand-delivered communication indicating the Park Service was coming in on Wednesday and demanding we turn over the keys and security codes," said Elson Strahan, president and CEO of the trust. "Since we own all the assets in the museum or they're on loan to us from private contributors, we're not going to turn them over to the Park Service."

The original agreement between the agency and the city of Vancouver was supposed to allow 180 days of transition time, Strahan said. With the short notice and even shorter deadline to turn over keys, the trust, which runs the museum for the city, made the call to move everything possible over to a hangar at Pearson Field before the deadline.

"We ended up having about 48 hours," Strahan said. "Will everything get out of here? No. There may be some things we have to retrieve, but most of it will be moved."

Tracy Fortmann, superintendant at the NPS' Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, couldn't be reached for comment Monday.

In an official news release on the Park Service website, she said:

"The National Park Service appreciates and values the work of the city of Vancouver and the Fort Vancouver National Trust in operating the Pearson Air Museum on the service's behalf, and we look forward to a continued productive partnership agreements with both organizations. The National Park Service is committed to working with both entities to ensure a seamless transition of the museum operations over the next 45 days and to ensure that the public can continue to enjoy all that the air museum has to offer."

The park service wants to take over and "operate the museum on the same schedule and on conclusion of the transition period, access to the museum will be provided to the public at no charge," the release said.

Strahan said the trust was also told that NPS would have "unilateral authority" over the museum.

'Unwarranted'

Herrera Beutler, who's been trying to help negotiate between the NPS and the trust, said she has been exploring a legislative solution to the problem in case issues aren't resolved.

"For months now, I've been working for a resolution between the park service and the Fort Vancouver Trust," she said. "It's clear that the park service's recent decisions are not consistent with the intent of Congress or the community when the management agreement was created in 1995."

She's drafting a bill to turn the museum land over to the city and the trust, she said.

"I've discussed with the House Resources Committee a possible Congressional hearing for the park service to explain how exactly its actions are serving residents of Southwest Washington," Herrera Beutler said. "Additionally, as a new member of the House Appropriations Interior Subcommittee that sets the park service's annual budget, I've already organized a meeting between the subcommittee chair and the director of the park service specifically about this issue."

Holmes also responded to the issue with a letter to Fortmann saying he was surprised at the NPS' actions and shortened transition period.

"Even a window of 45 days, as proffered in your letter, is insufficient and, frankly, unwarranted," his letter said.

At least 45 events have been scheduled at the museum over the next six months, and the park service's actions have jeopardized them, he added.

"The agreement governing the operation of the museum is between the city of Vancouver and NPS, not NPS and the trust. As such, it is my intent to assure that the trust -- as the city's subcontractor -- has the full 180 days to transition out of the museum operations," Holmes wrote.

But Strahan said the trust decided it wasn't taking any chances with the park service.

Seeking alternatives

On Tuesday, Cara Cantonwine, director of programs at the trust, said the group was already working to come up with alternative event venues for those that had contracted with the museum.

"We've been working in partnership with the Hilton Vancouver (Washington) to accommodate us with larger events," Cantonwine said. "Pearson was the largest building we had, and we can't accommodate proms and things elsewhere, but the Hilton can."

Smaller events can move to the Artillery Barracks, Red Cross or Marshall House buildings, she said.

"We will help our clients to the best of our ability find new venues," Cantonwine said.

As to future events at the site, she said "that's going to be up to the park service. I know they have stricter regulations."

Throughout the day Tuesday, several of the museum's 30 or so volunteers stopped by to help pack up and move equipment, gift shop items and displays.

Looking at the almost empty hangar Tuesday afternoon, Jim Lucas, a five year volunteer and former Marine Corps pilot, said he felt "profoundly disappointed."

"The volunteers, they all feel betrayed, terribly betrayed," Lucas said. "One of the kids that works here, Kaya, she started when she was 8, and she's 13 now. She was here helping clean stuff out. If you saw her face and the tears streaming down from her eyes. It tells it all."

Gordon O'Reilly, who's been a docent at the museum for six years, stood next to Lucas and nodded.

"I'm real sorry to see this place go," O'Reilly said. "I think the city of Vancouver is going to be poorer for this."

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