

Pearson Air Museum, over and out

Contents quickly cleared from building as people involved ponder next steps



Vivian Johnson for The Columbian

Only displays attached to the walls remained Wednesday at Pearson Air Museum after volunteers spent two days moving material out rather than risk handing private property over to the National Park Service.

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)

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Gary Carter, left, and Mike McGraw spread sheets of plastic Wednesday to protect models retrieved from Pearson Air Museum. McGraw offered part of his rented hangar space for material retrieved from the museum.

Confronted with the daunting task of finding temporary homes for 16 classic airplanes, hundreds of models, a gift shop and equipment, Laureano Mier, Pearson Air Museum manager, knew he was in for a tough week.

Over the weekend, the National Park Service officially gave the museum, run by the Fort Vancouver National Trust, 45 days to transition to new management. But the agency, which owns the land and hangar but not the displays or planes, also told Pearson staff they wanted the keys and security codes by Wednesday.

So the trust decided to move the contents of the museum — including many large, delicate planes — to new locations in a span of about 48 hours, rather than risk handing private property over to the Park Service.

What happened next, though, made Mier well up with tears of gratitude.

"People have been coming in, asking how they can help," Mier said. "It's really emotional. Volunteers have been helping us. A lot of pilots on (Pearson) Field have put their own planes out on the field so we can store our planes in their hangars."

The trust, which operated the museum for the city of Vancouver, announced Wednesday that it was closing the museum as a "result of an unresolved dispute with the National Parks Service regarding park use policy."

Tracy Fortmann, superintendant at the National Park Services' Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, said the service decided to take over operations after the trust said it "could not abide by our law and policy."

One sticking point in the talks was that the Park Service, and Fortmann, would assume decision-making and permitting responsibilities at the museum. The trust wanted to continue to run the site under its authority and the authority of the city of Vancouver.

The Park Service had hoped to work with the trust as a partner in the management of the site and was hoping for a smooth transition, Fortmann said.

"We were surprised and personally saddened and unaware that the trust had determined to remove all the property," Fortmann said. "We assumed that would remain in that space."

But the property doesn't belong to the Park Service, and the trust is responsible for it, Mier noted.

"It all belongs to the Fort Vancouver National Trust or to private owners who have loaned items to us," Mier said. "Everything here was done through donation. This is a Vancouver asset that belongs to the city."

Fortmann said the Park Service wanted to keep the museum open through the transition and that it will need to look at the options before deciding what to do with the site.

"We did not intend to be at this position," Fortmann said. "We need to re-evaluate the situation. We need to carefully address our next steps."

She added that the Park Service hopes to continue to make the space available for special uses and functions in the future.

News of the move spread fast through the community of museum fans and volunteers. Many have offered space, labor and moral support. And kids have stopped by in tears, wondering what will happen to a place that they've visited on field trips and where they have volunteered.

"The support from the community for me and for the museum has been truly overwhelming," Mier said. "I feel so privileged to have been able to work with the volunteers here."

Crews worked from morning to midnight Tuesday and were set to do the same Wednesday as they continued to clear materials out.

Mike McGraw, who rents two hangars from the city at Pearson Field, moved one of his planes to Longview for its annual maintenance about two months early so that the museum could store its C170 plane and about 30 models in his space, free of charge.

"They can probably have the space for six to eight weeks," McGraw said. "After that, we'll figure something else out."

Pilots at Pearson Field feel a personal connection to the museum, he said.

McGraw and his friend Gary Carter spent part of Wednesday afternoon putting a protective plastic cover over the models so they wouldn't be damaged by the weather.

"It can get damp in here," McGraw said. "Not all the time, but under certain conditions it will form its own rain cloud."

Asked if he had a favorite model from the museum, he said, "They're all my favorites. They're airplanes."

David Richards, who teaches shop at Fort Vancouver High School, also offered space in his hangar in Oregon to refugee airplanes from the museum.

"I've got room for two, maybe three airplanes if they need it," Richards said. "They've done so much for aviation education. They're a really important resource for educating high school kids. We're just stunned by this -- absolutely blindsided."

The museum's collection of planes is unique and delicate. Several are made of wood and fabric that can't withstand the elements for long.

"It's more important to keep those planes sheltered than it is for a modern plane," Richards said.

Willy Williamson, who manages Pearson Field for the city, said the airport would try its best to find options for continued storing of aircraft from the museum, but added that hangar space is completely booked through the end of the month.

"From the airport's perspective, we're looking at who can share their hangars and get the airplanes under cover," Williamson said.

All but two of the planes are in new hangars right now, and the two that are outside are metal and can withstand the weather for a short time, he added.

Private owners who have loaned classic planes to the museum would have to get special inspections and certifications to ensure that the planes were airworthy before taking them back.

So far, though, none of them have said they want their planes back. Mier said he's talked to all of them, and they all want to keep working with the trust to find a solution that will reopen the museum.

"I don't know what the future will be, but every single airplane, they all know that their airplanes are secure and they believe in us," Mier said. "Anybody that needs their plane back, we'll hold on to them until they're ready. But of all our planes, nobody's asked."

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