

Pickers show Pearson support

Park service criticized for flap that led to emptying of museum



Photo by [Zachary Kaufman](#) Norris Hibbler, left, shows a sign to a passing car as he and other community members show their support for Pearson Air Museum during a Thursday protest.

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)

As of Friday, February 8, 2013

What: Save Pearson Air Museum protest.

When: 2 p.m. Saturday.

Where: 1115 E. Fifth St.

Information: <https://www.facebook.com/SavePearsonAirMuseum>.



Photo by Zachary Kaufman
Kiggins Theatre showed its
support for Pearson Air
Museum by changing its
sign Thursday.

About 30 protesters held up signs opposing the National Park Service takeover of Pearson Air Museum on Thursday afternoon as they waved and cheered at cars passing by on the quiet street.

Across the way, an empty area of park land at the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site was marked off with cones and a scattering of picnic tables.

With a wry smile, Aaron Ochoa, a park ranger, walked through the group for a quick chat with Elson Strahan, president of the Fort Vancouver National Trust, which has been operating the museum for the city.

The two spoke briefly, and Ochoa walked back toward the crowd.

Asked if he was about to tell the makeshift group to disperse, he shook his head.

“They’re welcome to stay,” Ochoa said. “We’re the National Park Service. It’s good to have people here.”

He added, however, that he wanted the crowd to move across the way to the “designated First Amendment area” that the Park Service had set up.

Nobody budged.

Former Superior Court Judge John Wulle, who helped found the museum in 1983, stood with the protesters and noted that the Park Service had no authority to move residents demonstrating on a city street.

“I’ll give this group legal advice if they need it,” he said with a determined nod.

For a brief few minutes, three officials from the Park Service clustered in the designated area looking on at the protesters, then wandered away.

The protest, put together by a makeshift group of fans of the museum through a new Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/SavePearsonAirMuseum>, continued.

“Last night we were reading the news and we heard what happened,” said Kelly Beckelhiemer, who founded the page with her husband, James, and some of their friends. “As a longtime volunteer and supporter, (James) wanted to do more than just complain. He wanted to get involved.”

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 Park Service,

which owns the land and hangar but not the displays or planes, also told Pearson staff it 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.

On Wednesday, the trust also announced the museum would be closed indefinitely.

The Park Service and the trust have been trying to negotiate a deal to manage the museum for more than a year, but the two groups couldn't agree on a structure, said Tracy Fortmann, superintendent of the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

“At a certain point, it became clear to me that we needed to home in on the laws and regulations of the National Park Service,” Fortmann said, adding that the trust refused to yield authority of the site to the service as part of that agreement.

“That is not a decision that can be delegated or negotiated away,” she said.

The National Park Service sees the area as a “highly sensitive archaeological site” with pre-historic, military, aviation and cultural finds that need to be preserved.

As such, the park service should be involved in all permitting processes for events on the land, she added.

“There was an area where we just couldn't meet together,” Fortmann said of the trust.

The trust has managed the site for the city as a community resource, with events, educational programs for youth, and historical exhibits.

“Our position is that Pearson was developed as a community asset and should remain in the service of the community,” Strahan said of the dispute.

And from founder Wulle's perspective, the trust is in the right.

“The Park Service has a big gigantic bureaucratic ego, and it's about the preservation of power,” Wulle said. “This was built by the community without investment by the Park Service.”

Looking over at the empty museum, he added, “This is a visible sign that more work needs to be done behind the scenes.”

On the political level, officials said they were paying close attention to the issue.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat, said she hopes to work with the parties to find a solution to the dispute.

“My office has been working closely with the city, the trust, and the National Park Service to find a solution that keeps the Pearson Air Museum open to the public,” Murray said. “I’m disappointed that the parties have not yet been able to reach an agreement, but I’m committed to working with them to ensure that Vancouver doesn’t lose access to this cherished asset.”

Casey Bowman, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, a Republican, said the congresswoman is also actively working on the issue.

“Jaime is planning to introduce legislation that will turn control of Pearson Air Museum and the surrounding land over to the city — and back to the residents and visitors who for years have enjoyed it. We’re fine-tuning the bill details to ensure this will be a solid, long-term fix, and she plans to introduce it when Congress returns to session next week,” he said in an email to The Columbian.

Several local state legislators also wrote Fortmann a letter saying they disapproved of the Park Service’s actions to take over the museum and that it is “disturbing and upsetting that the NPS usurp the Trust’s authority.”

The letter was signed by Sen. Don Benton, Rep. Paul Harris, Rep. Monica Stonier, Sen. Ann Rivers, Rep. Brandon Vick and Rep. Liz Pike.

“Please reconsider your decision to terminate your agreement with the city of Vancouver and give more authority and autonomy to the Fort Vancouver National Trust. This would allow for the continued enjoyment and usage by the great people of Vancouver, who are the real victims in this termination,” they wrote.

Vancouver Mayor Tim Leavitt said the city also is highly disappointed by the situation.

“We directed the city manager to exhaust all means available so the museum remains a valuable asset,” Leavitt said. “The trust has done a tremendous job of developing that as a community asset. They have done great work.”

He added that he hasn’t spoken with Fortmann and hasn’t been informed of what the Park Service plans to do with the site.

“We’re kind of in the dark right now,” he said.

If the trust decided to reopen the museum on city land, “I’m sure we would be open to those discussions,” Leavitt said.

The Park Service is still trying to determine its next steps as to what to do with the site, Fortmann said.

“We’re going to have to look at moving forward,” Fortmann said. “It’s regrettable that all the contents were removed. We’re going to have to look at the possibilities.”

Until the issue is resolved, the Beckelhiemers and other fans of the museum said they'd continue to picket.

"We'll be back," James Beckelhiemer said. "We're going to keep at it. We're going to fight this."