

Pearson Air Museum takeover hinted at in '09

Managing air museum cited in Park Service document



Photo by [Troy Wayrynen](#)

Visitors to the Pearson Air Museum were greeted by very different displays when the National Park Service reopened the facility in Late February.

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)

As of Friday, March 8, 2013

Greetings Tim,

I am sorry I could not respond to your message yesterday - I was visiting a relative at the hospital until late.

I am not certain what "2010 document" you are referring to, but that was the year we began cataloging the portion of the Pearson Air Museum collection that is in storage, with the permission of the City of Vancouver. The following is a description of collection management for the Vancouver National Historic Reserve partnership, which has been on our website:

Management of Museum Collections at the Vancouver National Historic Reserve

Museum collections are one of the most important resources of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. They are tangible, authentic pieces of the past from native peoples, Fort Vancouver, Pearson Field, and Vancouver Airways.

The legislatively-mandated partners of the Historic Reserve - the City of Vancouver, the State of Washington, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Army - agreed that the National Park Service would be the lead agency for the care of museum collections.

This decision reflected the professional museum policies of the National Park Service, the second largest museum system in the nation after the Smithsonian. National Park Service centers are held to the highest standards, and are the caretakers of some of our nation's most special treasures.

For many years, professional curators at four Vancouver National Historic Site Area centers for museum items associated with the Historic Reserve, over two million archaeological and historic artifacts housed in a secure, climate-controlled facility on site. The exception was the Pearson Air Museum collection specifically.

In 2010, with the permission of the City of Vancouver, the National Park Service also began cataloging the portion of the Pearson Air Museum collection that was held in storage. We do not own the items, but are caring for them on behalf of the City of Vancouver. This is still the case, and we will continue to do so unless directed otherwise by the City.

We did do a full physical inventory of the Pearson collection (including aircraft) to confirm the records in a database that had been maintained for many years. In addition, NPS staff met with representatives from the Trust and the City to discuss and draft several professional museum documents which Pearson did not get back. The NPS team that met with the City and Trust - including staff from Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, the NPS Pacific West Regional Office, and specialists in aviation collections from other national parks - was brought in at no cost to the partners in order to offer our expertise. One of the efforts was an update to the overall scope of collection statement for the Vancouver National Historic Reserve - this document details the top priorities for acquisition to a museum collection and is considered an essential baseline document for professional museums - so that goals for Pearson would be accurately reflected. NPS staff also drafted a preventive maintenance plan and an emergency operations plan for the Pearson facility. A preventive maintenance plan addresses housekeeping and

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Document

[Langford response 2](#)

The PRS statement in question was written for a museum collections funding source, and that aspect of museum work was the only focus. The audience for the proposal understood that. This statement did not address the role of the Trust, then or in future.

As I stated in my earlier email the NPS is the lead for curators for the partners of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, and at the request of the City we were fulfilling that role for the collections of Pearson Air Museum. The funding was awarded, and resulted in the inventory and assessment I noted. At the time, in our discussions with the City, the leading idea was to transfer ownership of collections in storage to the NPS, as has been done with other partner collections from the Historic Reserve, but unfortunately that ended up not happening because so much of the collection lacked meaningful documentation from previous operators of Pearson Air Museum and we would not have been able to accept it. At the time we finished the assessment, we made the Trust and the City aware of the documentation issue and left the resolution to them.

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An internal document from the National Park Service could indicate that the agency was planning as early as 2009 to take over the Pearson Air Museum.

The document, obtained by The Columbian through a Freedom of Information Act request, asks for funding to catalog items at the museum because: "The National Park Service will reassume management of the Pearson Air Museum in January of 2010."

Elson Strahan, president of the Fort Vancouver National Trust, and Mike True, the chief financial officer, said they recall the cataloging effort, but had no idea of the wording on the internal Park Service document. The trust operated the museum for the city of Vancouver until Feb. 6, when the Park Service assumed control of the building and its management.

"We did not see this document, we were not advised of this wording," Strahan said.

Instead, the trust was told that the effort, which spanned from 2009 to 2011, was aimed at using the Park Service cataloging and archiving expertise to help the museum keep track of the items in its collection, True said.

"It was strictly just a function assisting the trust with its archival materials," True said of the Park Service effort.

The document for project PMIS 150379, created by Park Service Curator Theresa Langford, shows a \$54,000 budget to process and catalog about 5,000 items in the collection between 2009 and 2011.

"What they had represented was that they would like to incorporate things we had into their information base," Strahan said.

In a PDF reply to The Columbian's requests for comment, Langford said the Park Service conducted the survey "to confirm the records in a database that had been maintained for many years."

She said the Park Service, city and trust worked on the effort "at no cost to the partners" to update a scope of a collection statement for the Vancouver National Historic Reserve.

"I can assure you that these tasks were done in a cooperative partnership, and contrary to the interpretation you left on my voicemail, at that time the National Park Service assumed the trust would continue to operate the museum," she said in her response.

But the 2009 document does seem to imply that the Park Service expected to get ownership of at least some of the collection.

In the Oct. 24, 2011, "Component Status Report" section, Langford noted, "The entire Pearson Air Museum collection of approximately 10,000 items has been inventoried and sorted according to the newly updated Scope of Collection statement. The items to be accessioned into the NPS museum collection (approximately 2,400 items) have all been cataloged on spreadsheets and can be imported into ICMS directly as soon as ownership of this collection is transferred to NPS, expected to be late this fall."

When the document was first created in 2009, the trust had been operating the museum for about four years as part of a cooperative agreement between the city of Vancouver and National Park Service that was created in 1995 and not set to expire until 2025.

The timing of the cataloging effort was also about three years before the Park Service told the trust and the city that it wanted to create a new cooperative agreement more directly with the trust to operate the museum.

U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Camas, said she was also concerned after looking at the wording by the Park Service.

"It appears from these documents as though the Park Service expected to transfer the entire Pearson Air Museum collection from private owners to the Park Service," she said in an email to The Columbian. "I hope that's not the case, because if that was indeed the Park Service's intention, it's at best a gross misunderstanding of the trust's desires and relationship with its exhibitors or at worst a high-handed asset grab by a federal agency that's overstepping its bounds."

In a follow-up PDF response to The Columbian, Langford said the document "was written for a museum collections funding source, and that aspect of the work was the only focus."

But she added that "at the time, in our discussions with the city, the leading idea was to transfer ownership of collections in storage to the NPS, as has been done with other partner collections from the Historic Reserve."

She said that despite that idea, the Park Service couldn't take ownership of the items because much of the collection lacked proper documentation from previous operators of the museum.

"At the time we finished the assessment, we made the Trust and the city aware of the documentation issues and left the resolution to them," Langford said.

But another document given to The Columbian by the trust also has language that indicates that the Park Service intended to take over the whole museum before the two agencies began arguing over the management contract.

According to the Park Service 2011 Annual Report for Fort Vancouver National Historic Site: "This year, we held meetings with Vancouver National Historic Reserve partners to address the transition in management responsibility, and these meetings will continue through next year."

At the time it came out, Strahan said the Park Service assured him that the language didn't mean the agency intended to take over management of the museum.

"(Fort Vancouver National Historic Site Superintendent Tracy) Fortmann said that this was simply awkwardly written and that the NPS had no such intention of taking over management. This was in the early spring, which eventually led to our May 2011 position paper and visit to San Francisco in trying to figure out what was going on," Strahan said in an email to The Columbian.

Talks between the trust and the Park Service on a new cooperative agreement, along with the San Francisco visit, began in April 2012. A draft agreement created by the Park Service was sent to the trust in May that year. But the parties weren't able to work out a deal, and the Park Service terminated its cooperative agreement with the city on Feb. 1, 2013.

The trust subsequently moved its exhibits and inventory and handed the museum over to the Park Service on Feb. 6. The Park Service reopened it under its own management on Feb. 27.

One sticking point in the talks between the trust and Park Service was that the Park Service wanted all museum exhibits and events to be under the authority of Fortmann. Another was that the Park Service had been imposing too strict or random criteria for events at the museum.

After reading the 2009 document, Strahan said he was surprised by the Park Service's blunt wording that it would "reassume management" of the museum, but he added that it could explain some of the agency's motives.

"It certainly sheds significant light on developments over the past couple of years when the Park Service has been pushing to obtain more control," Strahan said.

Herrera Beutler said she plans to look into the issue before her bill to transfer the museum and surrounding 7 acres from the Park Service to the city of Vancouver goes to a hearing March 14.

"I would be very interested in a clarification of these comments by the Park Service, and I will get answers at next week's hearing, if not before," Herrera Beutler said. "Revelations like these do nothing to help restore the trust that's been lost between the Park Service and the community. If the Park Service has an agenda regarding the management of Pearson that it hasn't shared publicly, it needs to come clean now."

Pearson Air Museum timeline

- 1946: Vancouver Barracks is declared surplus by the Army after World War II. 1946: The National Park Service studies the area and asks for the land between Evergreen Highway and the Columbia River to set up a historical park.
- 1947: The city of Vancouver takes over Pearson Field as a local airport. The War Assets Administration transfers in perpetuity all of the reservation lands south of Evergreen Highway not retained by the Army or the National Park Service, with a clause that if the land ceases to be used as an airport, the Park Service gets it.
- 1947: About 64 acres of the post are reactivated as headquarters for Army reserve training in the Pacific Northwest.
- 1948: Fort Vancouver National Monument is established to protect and maintain the Hudson's Bay Company site.
- 1954: The Department of the Interior officially makes Fort Vancouver National Monument a national park. A few years later, the name is changed to Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.
- 1972: The city of Vancouver sells the Park Service 72 acres of Pearson Airfield property for \$544,500, including the 7-acre site of the museum complex. The goal was to let the city move airport operations to the east, farther away from the reconstructed fort, and for the Park Service to get rid of some hangars to develop more of the historic site. The agreement also allowed city use of that land until 2002.
- 1995: A cooperative agreement (1443-CA9000-96-001) between the city of Vancouver and National Park Service is signed to create the Pearson Air Museum complex on Park Service land but managed and operated by the city. The 30-year contract was set to continue through 2025 unless terminated.
- 2005: Fort Vancouver National Trust enters into agreement with the city of Vancouver to operate the museum complex. The Pearson Field Historical Society, which had been running the museum, dissolves.

- 2009 to 2011: Park Service project PMIS 15037 catalog of Pearson Air Museum inventory is conducted.
- April 2012: Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and trust officials meet with Park Service Pacific West Regional Director Chris Lehnertz to try to create a new cooperative agreement with the trust for Pearson Air Museum.
- May 18, 2012: The Park Service delivers a draft agreement to the trust. Several back-and-forth questions follow.
- Nov. 6, 2012: The Park Service meets with the trust, gives its criteria for continued operation of the museum. It demands a response from the trust by Jan. 11, 2013, either agreeing to the criteria or agreeing to leave.
- Jan. 10, 2013: The trust sends a letter explaining its modifications to the National Park Service proposal and why it can't run the museum under Park Service restrictions.
- Feb. 1, 2013: The Park Service terminates its agreement with the city in a document signed by Superintendent Tracy Fortmann and City Manager Eric Holmes. As part of the termination the Park Service demands the trust cease and discontinue operations "because the city of Vancouver is not substantively engaged in the operation of the museum." The Park Service demands keys and alarm code information be given to park staff by Feb. 6.
- Feb. 4-6, 2013: The trust rapidly packs up its displays and moves them off-site, then hands over an essentially empty museum.
- Feb. 27, 2013: The Park Service reopens Pearson Air Museum under its own management.