

**Elson Strahan
President and CEO
Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust,
dba Fort Vancouver National Trust**

**Written testimony in support of H.R. 716, for the Subcommittee on Public Lands and
Environmental Regulation**

March 14, 2013

I. Introduction

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. I am here today to ask for your help to save the Pearson Air Museum. I work for the Fort Vancouver National Trust, which operated the air museum on behalf of the City of Vancouver. Eighteen years ago, using community funding and city support, the City of Vancouver built the Pearson Air Museum adjacent to Pearson Airfield, a city-owned airport that is one of the oldest operating airfields in the United States. The air museum itself was built on the corner of a larger area that is owned by the National Park Service (“NPS”), and therefore the City’s development and operation of the museum, on NPS grounds, was guided by a cooperative agreement.

Until last month, the Pearson Air Museum was packed with dozens of classic planes, models, and hands-on flight simulators. It made lasting impressions on the over 30,000 people each year who came to visit, and with the help of community volunteers, it excelled at delivering educational programs designed to inspire and educate about the Golden Age of Aviation. The museum hosted after-school programs, summer camps, provided specialized tours for the deaf and blind, and used cutting edge approaches to teach aviation history in a way that also equipped students with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) based, real life skills. It was a first class air museum, offered at a minimal cost.

The Pearson Air Museum also hosted over 100 local community events annually. We believed that since the community built and funded the museum, the doors should be open to everyone for special community events—for example, benefit concerts for the military, church picnics, weddings and proms. By opening the doors of the museum to the community, at low rental rates, we were also able to sustain operations. Since the museum opened its doors in 1995, it has operated using a sustainability model with the purpose of independently supporting operations and educational programs without federal funds.

Last month, Pearson Air Museum was vacated. We did not take that step lightly, but did so only because the NPS terminated the longstanding cooperative agreement that had been expected to last well into the next decade. NPS’s termination was based on what appeared, frankly, to be arbitrary grounds. The community’s partnership to operate the museum that had worked so well, for so long, was suddenly fraught with new problems. For over a year we tried to work through all the issues raised by the NPS in order to save the museum ourselves. Our attempts failed.

Today, I am here to ask you to support H.R. 716. It will save the Pearson Air Museum by directing the Secretary of the Interior to convey the seven-acre air museum complex to the City of Vancouver. Our community is ready to restore the museum to what it once was. To do that, we ask for your help.

II. History of the Pearson Air Museum Complex

The National Park Service property that is the subject of H.R. 716 was originally owned by the City of Vancouver. In 1972, the City sold the NPS 72 acres of airfield property for \$7,562 an acre, including the seven-acre parcel on which the Pearson Air Museum complex currently sits. This was motivated, in part, to allow the City to move active airport operations further away from the NPS's reconstruction of historic Fort Vancouver.

The Pearson Air Museum complex, as it stands today, was developed in 1995, pursuant to a cooperative agreement between the City and the NPS. The NPS gave the community permission to build the air museum on a small parcel of NPS's larger historic site that was adjacent to the city-owned, and also historic, Pearson Airfield. The cooperative agreement expressly provided that the contract was "to reflect the relationship between the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and the City because the principal purpose of the relationship is to carry out a public purpose... rather than to acquire property or services for the direct benefit of the United States Government." The cooperative agreement was drafted to remain in effect until at least 2025, with renewals thereafter. In reliance on the cooperative agreement, the City and the community raised \$4.2 million for capital investment in the museum complex.

In 1996, Congress formally incorporated the larger 366-acre Vancouver National Historic Reserve, which the community refers to as the Fort Vancouver National Site, as a partnership between the NPS and the City of Vancouver. This included the Jack Murdock Aviation Center, the seven-acre complex on which the Pearson Air Museum hangars are located. A copy of that legislation is included in your materials. You will also find an aerial photo of the Reserve and a site map.

For approximately ten years, the Pearson Air Museum was managed and operated on behalf of the City by The Pearson Field Historical Society. In 2005, my organization, the Fort Vancouver National Trust, assumed this responsibility. Since 2005 there has been a minimum \$2 million operating investment by the Trust and the City, and similar operational support was provided through the Pearson Society and City from 1995 until 2005. I estimate the total community investments in the Pearson Air Museum to be well over \$8 million, inclusive of initial capital contributions and operational support since the museum complex was developed. Over these past eighteen years, the NPS has contributed negligible capital and operational support to the museum.

The Pearson Air Museum's exhibits, including planes, were owned by the Trust or were on loan to the Trust by the local aviation community. The Trust's annual budget for Museum operations and educational programs was over \$300,000. This capital commitment was augmented by our more than 35 community volunteers who contribute more than 5,000 hours each year.

III. Education and Community Events at the Pearson Air Museum

The Trust viewed its investment in the museum complex as mission driven for educational programs, and we have been extremely successful in developing a community asset that inspires and educates about the Golden Age of Aviation while equipping students with skills for their future. For example, we have worked with the regional high schools and other educational partners to provide cutting edge STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) curriculum that is steeped in history as part of a Careers in Aerospace program; established a partnership with *Air Science Kids* for their after-school program; developed a series of week-long aviation summer camps; created specialized tours for the Washington State School for the Blind and School for the Deaf, which are both located in Vancouver; and initiated an Aviation Merit Badge program for the Boy Scouts of America. A list of many of the programs developed, partnerships forged, and assets secured is included in your attachments.

Since the Museum opened its doors in 1995, events were incorporated into a sustainability model to help support operations and educational programs. Each year, we facilitated over 100 community events, and we believe that since the community contributed the capital to build and operate the museum complex, the community should be able to utilize and enjoy the facilities through special events as well as general visitation. In fact, because of our low rental rates, the museum has been a primary event site for nonprofits such as the YWCA, Northwest Association of Blind Athletes, Southwest Washington Medical Center Foundation, March of Dimes, Rotary Foundation, Multiple Sclerosis Society, and the Chamber of Commerce, to name just a few.

IV. Loss of the Museum

In early February, the NPS Superintendent Tracy Fortmann issued a letter to the City and the Trust that NPS was terminating the cooperative agreement, and the Superintendent announced that her staff would be assuming control of the Pearson Air Museum. The Trust was given less than 48 hours' notice to turn over keys and alarm codes. Because we could not simply turn over to a third party our exhibits and those on loan from generous donors for which the Trust had stewardship responsibility, we were effectively forced to vacate, leaving the museum empty. Today, the Pearson Air Museum contains some new NPS-owned exhibits—a boat, a tractor, a steam powered car—but it is no longer the air museum it once was. Included with my statement are photographs that reflect the change.

The community response to the loss of the Pearson Air Museum has been stunning: protests, signs in the windows of local businesses, editorials and letters to the editor calling for transfer of the museum from the NPS to the City, children collecting signatures to send to their federal and local representatives. If you Google, "Save Pearson Air Museum" you will find postings that reflect the real sense of loss by the community.

It is very disappointing that it came to this. While the partnership between the NPS, the City and the Trust was successful for many years, the relationship between the NPS and the Trust recently began to inexplicably deteriorate, and the Trust's Executive Committee could not understand why.

Our Executive Committee flew to San Francisco to meet with Chris Lehnertz, the NPS Pacific West Regional Director, seeking to re-establish a positive relationship. It was not a successful effort. The Regional Director told us that NPS regulations are the same for all NPS parks and that our site is no different than Yellowstone in this respect. The Director also told us that under those regulations the Superintendent was to have unilateral control of anything on NPS land. We understand the NPS must follow its own rules, as it interprets them; however, the position that the NPS has expressed with regard to the Pearson Air Museum will not work well for our community.

During the discussion that led up to the termination of the cooperative agreement, we were asked to sign a new agreement that, among other provisions, would have required:

- The transfer of ownership and management of the Trust's collections and exhibits to the NPS.
- The Trust to agree to submit to the unilateral authority of the NPS Superintendent over all programs, activities and events.
- Current relationships and agreements the Trust had with education partners would be transferred to NPS management, and the NPS would also prohibit the Trust from entering into any other agreements with education partners.
- NPS authorization of all of the more than 100 events inside and outside the museum complex with very restrictive criteria for approvals.
- NPS approval of all Trust income and expenditures associated with the museum complex, even though the NPS would bear no financial responsibility for operational or capital support for the museum complex.

A primary justification for the NPS termination of the current agreement was an assertion that the Trust was not acting in accordance with NPS laws and regulations because the Trust had approved certain events that the Park Service deemed inappropriate for the museum complex. These include an All Church Picnic, a USO benefit concert, and a benefit concert for veterans called the *Night of the Patriot*. In addition to being wonderful community events, we believed that they were especially well suited to the site because many of our area churches originated at Fort Vancouver and the Army had been on the site from 1849 until last year. The NPS effectively prohibited these outdoor events by imposing so many restrictions that they were no longer feasible to hold as planned. The determination by the NPS that these events were unsuitable for the site was perplexing to me, as events comparable to those being denied have been held since the museum opened in 1995 and elsewhere on NPS property.

For example, one reason that a church picnic and the two benefit concerts were not allowed was because amplified music was deemed by the NPS to interfere with the tranquility of the site. The Reserve is in the middle of the City, and a highway, a freeway, and a rail line border the site. It is under the flight path of the nearby Portland International Airport and, of course, there is an active airfield on the site which has a runway that is parallel to the entire length of the Fort palisade. It is a wonderful gathering place, but it is far from tranquil.

Further, the All Church Picnic, which is a community picnic that brings together church members from across the county, had been held successfully at the Museum site for the three previous summers. Last summer, the Chief Historian at the park suddenly informed picnic organizers that their event lacked a meaningful association with the park (where a number of the earliest churches in the Northwest were established) and effectively denied the event, forcing it to be canceled. This struck us as curious, since NPS had itself permitted other church events, with music, on its grounds.

For many years the NPS has permitted Fourth of July celebrations to occur at the Reserve that draw 35,000 people, feature bands, amplified music, fireworks, and all of the types of activities that one would expect to find at an urban park. The NPS has also recruited and permitted a National Cross Country Championship on its property for the past three years, which last Fall involved driving some 500 metal “T” and flag string posts into the ground throughout the park to mark the course. At the same time the NPS has recently applied what has seemed like a very different set of standards to events proposed by the local community—raising concerns about “archeological sensitivities” of the grounds, amplified music, tranquility, and the number of community attendees—and in the last year, the NPS’s permitting practices caused a number of long running, successful community events to be canceled.

These are just a few examples that highlight what many in the local community believe to be the contradictory, subjective, and arbitrary application of the NPS’s regulations to events at the Pearson Air Museum over the past year. From our perspective, the new found concerns about long-running events seemed more like a justification to terminate the cooperative agreement and assume federal control of the air museum, than an even-handed application of the permitting policies that the NPS is entrusted to enforce.

V. Conclusion

The Pearson Air Museum’s exhibits are now in storage hangars at the nearby city-owned airfield and our museum staff, volunteers, and community members are working diligently to save the museum. H.R. 716 gives us hope.

In their film series, Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan asserted that the creation of our National Parks was “America’s best idea,” and I agree. A primary focus of their film was on our natural resource parks, with their unsurpassed grandeur. Indeed, it is from these National Parks that many of the regulations governing use of our National Parks were created, and therein lies part of the challenge confronting our community. What H.R. 716 accomplishes is that it relieves the NPS of its regulatory burdens that appear to be preventing it from allowing the museum to flourish, as it had done for so many years.

This legislation will save the Pearson Air Museum by directing the Secretary of the Interior to convey the seven-acre air museum complex to the City of Vancouver. Our community is ready to restore the museum so that it can continue to provide the educational programming and services on which the community has come to rely.

Accordingly, the Trust and the City of Vancouver ask you to support H.R. 716.



City of Vancouver • P.O. Box 1995 • Vancouver, WA 98668-1995

www.cityofvancouver.us

February 13, 2013

The Honorable Jaime Herrera Beutler
United States House of Representatives
Howard House – 750 Anderson Street Officers Row
Vancouver, WA 98661

1130 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Herrera Beutler:

Thank you for your strong interest and support of Pearson Air Museum. Ensuring public access to this unique asset is a high priority for the City of Vancouver and your efforts in Congress are truly appreciated.

I have reviewed your proposed legislation that would transfer the building and 7 acres surrounding Pearson Air Museum to the City of Vancouver for long term stewardship and operation.

This approach would satisfy the city's interest in ensuring that the Pearson Air Museum Complex continues to be managed in a way that serves the original intent of providing the widest and best possible use for citizens and visitors alike. The City supports this approach and the legislation you have drafted. Please know that I would be happy to serve as a witness in support of the bill should the need arise.

Again, I appreciate your hard work on an issue that is so important to our community.

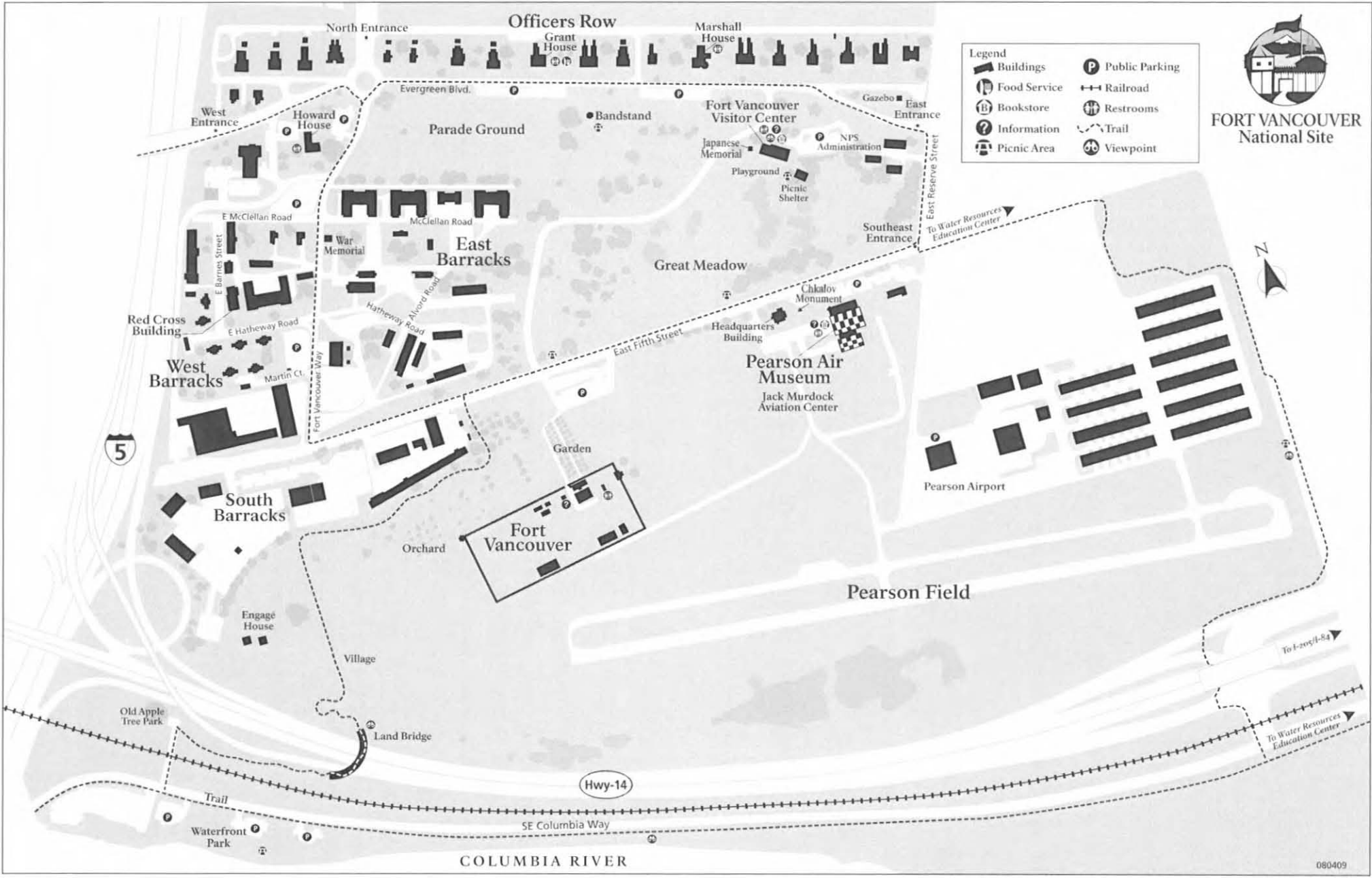
Sincerely,

Eric J. Holmes
City Manager

cc: The Honorable Patty Murray
The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Vancouver City Council
Ted Gathe
Jan Bader
Elson Strahan

Vancouver City Council

Mayor Timothy D. Leavitt • Jeanne Harris • Jeanne E. Stewart • Larry J. Smith • Jack Burkman • Bart Hansen • Bill Turley
City Manager Eric Holmes



- Legend**
- Buildings
 - Food Service
 - Bookstore
 - Information
 - Picnic Area
 - Public Parking
 - Railroad
 - Restrooms
 - Trail
 - Viewpoint



Selected Highlights of Accomplishments by the Pearson Air Museum

Since assuming responsibility for operating the Pearson Air Museum in 2005, the Fort Vancouver National Trust has been successful in achieving a number of significant advances in the museum's collection, visitor services, formal and informal educational and public programs, and establishing partnerships with local organizations, examples include:

Educational Programming

- Developed four comprehensive, week long, aviation summer camp programs for 2011 and 2012 for students ranging in age from 9 to 17.
- Established a partnership with Leadership for Clark County and the Clark County Skills Center to create an accredited program for high school students to explore technical careers in aviation in a three-week Summer Camp Program. Twenty-two students were enrolled and thirty-three were on a waiting list.
- Established a partnership with *Air Science Kids* for their after-school program.
- Initiated the well-received Open Cockpit Day, later expanded to include a Young Eagles Program with the *Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 105* from Hillsboro, Oregon and EAA Chapter 782 from Grove Field, Washington. These events have expanded to include two sessions in 2012 that flew over two hundred students and families on May 26 and August 25, 2012.
- Contributed to the living history programming for the 2012 Portland Rose Festival celebrating 100 years of Silas Christofferson, hosting a history program for 1500 students in the greater Portland and Vancouver Schools. Also participated in the Grand Floral and Memorial Day parade and programs.
- Developed tours specifically tailored for students from the Washington State School for the Blind and the Washington State School for the Deaf, which are both located in Vancouver.
- Initiated the Aviation Merit Badge program for the Boy Scouts of America.
- Built the Flight Simulator Lab that features 12 workstations with CH Eclipse Yokes and Microsoft Flight Simulator X. Continuous improvements include static model aircraft exhibits, reader boards, software and hardware updates. This lab is integral for our summer camps, after school and Saturday education programs.
- Established a quarterly guest speaker lecture series.
- Established a four-part, STEM based, educational tour for youth and adults.
- Worked towards developing a STEM oriented museum “hands-on” exhibits that already include vertical and horizontal wind tunnels and pressure driven rockets.
- Established a classroom and learning lab as part of the Pearson Restoration Hanger on Pearson Field.
- Published in-house *Not Without Hazards, the Extraordinary Career of Lt. Alexander Pearson*.

Public Programming

- Co-hosted event commemorating the Centennial Anniversary of Pearson Field.
- Co-hosted the 75th Anniversary of the Chkalov Transpolar Flight from Russia, which terminated at Pearson Field and the air crew was met and hosted by then Vancouver Barracks Commander, General George C. Marshall. The anniversary celebration took place in June 2012.
- Hosted Waddell and Reed WWI Mobile Memorial Museum Living History Tour, October 2011.
- Developed Tuskegee Airman Case to honor the memory of the Tuskegee Fighter Wing.
- Hosted the *Land Here Live Here* Economic Development Event for the Portland-Vancouver region in Summer 2011.
- Established “Under the Wings,” a youth and family reading program and annual Aviation Harvest Day and Fly With Santa programs including family oriented, hands-on activities that attract guests that would not otherwise visit the museum.

Establishing Community Partnerships

- Museum of Flight, Seattle, Washington
- Oregon Air National Guard 142nd Wing, Portland, Oregon
- Fern Prairie Modelers, Camas, Washington
- Northwest Antique Aircraft Association, Scappoose, Oregon
- Western Antique Airplane and Automobile Museum, Hood River, Oregon
- Civil Air Patrol Fort Vancouver Composite Squadron
- Pearson Field Advocates for General Aviation
- The Federal Aviation Administration, Portland, Oregon
- The Airport Advisory Committee for Pearson Field
- The Rose Festival Foundation, Portland, Oregon
- Washington State School for the Deaf
- Washington State School for the Blind
- PDX Airliners International
- Experimental Aviation Association Chapter 105 and Chapter 782
- Pemberton & Sons Aviation
- World's End Transit
- Leadership for Clark County
- LifePort Inc.
- Insitu (drone development company), Bingen, Washington
- Evergreen Aviation and Space Museum, McMinnville, Oregon
- Portland Community College
- Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee
- Willamette Valley Soaring Club
- Vancouver USA Regional Tourism Office
- Columbia River Economic Development Council
- Earth2World
- Air Science Kids
- Clark County Skills Center
- American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics
- The Boeing Company
- Hibbler Aviation
- Vancouver Community Library

Enhancing the Museum's Collection

- Converted the former restoration hangar, adjoining the main Pearson hangar, to provide additional space to display aircraft and enable rotating exhibits of aircraft not previously displayed.
- Obtained long-term loan arrangements for the replica 1913 Voisin French bomber and 1917 Fokker Dr.1 aircraft.
- Obtained a 1941 Ercoupe for the education program.
- Acquired on loan a 1942 Centrifugal Nene Ten Jet Engine for exhibit and education programming.
- Acquired on loan the Yellowstone Park Service 1925 White Bus that was repurposed during WWII for the Johnson Flying Service to deliver pilots to their aircraft.
- Acquired on loan the 1910 Paul Mantz Curtis Pusher from the Western Antique Aeroplane and Automobile Museum (WAAAM) in Hood River, Oregon.
- Worked toward acquisition of 1942 Meyers OTW.
- Worked toward five-year loan of a Pietenpol Air Camper Bi-plane.
- Acquired Schweizer SGS-1-26D Sailplane with no restrictions.
- Coordinated with Microsoft to include higher detail Pearson Airfield and surrounding area in subsequent Microsoft Flight Simulator programs.
- Built relationship with local aviation hero Addison Pemberton and established rotation of his collection of antique aircraft, to include a Boeing 40-C, through the museum, as we have done with other area antique aircraft owners.
- Established partnership with various entities to coordinate the celebration of Pacific Northwest Historical Flights.
- Improved physical display and inventory of the Gift shop; replaced outdated staff computers and inventory control software; updated all video exhibits from VHS to DVD format.

Examples of Outreach Highlighting Pearson Field and the Pearson Air Museum

- Pearson Field featured in an article in *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, the “magazine of record” for Pacific Northwest history.
- An article detailing Pearson Field and the Pearson Air Museum in *Sport Aviation Magazine*, March 2012.
- Pearson Air Museum included in FAA Pearson Field 10 Year Airport Master Plan update 2012.
- Developed comprehensive media program, including social media.
- Successful advocacy for coveted designation by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics as an AIAA Historical Site; the dedication ceremony took place in September 2012.

Appendix A: Legislation

Public Law 104-333; the “Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996”

SEC. 502. VANCOUVER NATIONAL HISTORIC RESERVE.

(a) Establishment — There is established the Vancouver National Historic Reserve in the State of Washington (referred to in this section as the “Reserve”), consisting of the area described in the report entitled “Vancouver National Historic Reserve Feasibility Study and Environmental Assessment” published by the Vancouver Historical Study Commission and dated April 1993 as authorized by Public Law 101-523 (referred to in this section as the “Vancouver National Historic Reserve Report”).

(b) Administration — (1) The Reserve shall be administered through a general management plan developed in accordance with this section, and approved by the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of the Army.

(2) Not later than three years after the date of enactment of this Act, the National Park Service shall submit to the Secretaries a general management plan for the administration of the Reserve.

(3) The general management plan shall be developed by a Partnership comprised of a representative from the National Park Service, a representative of the Historic Preservation Office of the State of Washington, a representative of the Department of the Army, and a representative of the City of Vancouver, Washington.

(4) The general management plan shall be developed in accordance with the specific findings and recommendations of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Report, along with any other considerations not otherwise in conflict with the Report, and shall include at a minimum a statement of purpose, an interpretive plan, and an economic plan for Pearson Field.

(5) The Reserve shall not be deemed to be a new unit of the National Park System.

(c) No Limitation on FAA Authority. —The establishment of the Reserve shall not limit —

(1) the authority of the Federal Aviation Administration over air traffic control, or aviation activities at Pearson Airpark; or

(2) limit operations and airspace in the vicinity of Portland International Airport.

(d) Authorization of Appropriations --There are authorized to be appropriated \$400,000 per year for operational costs for each fiscal year following enactment of this Act and \$5,000,000 for development costs.

Public Law 101-523, 1997–1996 Interior Appropriations

Sec. 334. The National Park Service, in accordance with the Memorandum of Agreement between the United States National Park Service and the City of Vancouver dated November 4, 1994, shall permit general aviation on its portion of Pearson Field in Vancouver, Washington until the year 2022, during which time a plan and method for transitioning from general aviation aircraft to historic aircraft shall be completed; such transition to be accomplished by that date. This action shall not be construed to limit the authority of the Federal Aviation Administration over air traffic control or aviation activities at Pearson Field or limit operations and airspace of Portland International Airport.

**Photos of Pearson Air Museum Under Local Community Management
by the Fort Vancouver National Historic Trust (2005 to 2013)**



Photo by Zachary Kaufman

Source: <http://www.columbian.com/news/2013/feb/04/park-service-ends-deal-with-city-pearson-air-museu/>



Source: Fort Vancouver National Trust

Pearson Air Museum Reopened Under NPS Management on February 27, 2013



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Air Museum reopens under new management (with video)



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.

Source: <http://www.columbian.com/news/2013/feb/27/air-museum-reopens-under-new-management/>