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Proposed entrance fee hikes at national parks could backfire and push visitors to annual passes

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By [Jason Blevins](#) Nov 3, 2017, 5:44 pm

A plan to bump entrance fees at the [17 busiest national parks to \\$70 from \\$30 during the peak summer months](#) will help parks struggling to cover the tab for long-delayed upkeep as crowds continue to surge.

But if that peak-season pricing plan is deployed next summer, the anticipated spike in demand for \$80 America the Beautiful annual passes — a mere \$10 extra for a year’s access to about 2,000 federal recreation sites — could hinder the National Park Service’s quest to balance cost-sharing between visitors and the federal government.

“It is unknown how these proposed increases will impact the parks and the people who visit them, but it does seem reasonable that people will see the bargain in buying the America the Beautiful annual pass for entry into all our national parks and other federal lands,” said Emily Douce, the director of budget and appropriations for the National Parks Conservation Association. “Our concern is how much analysis did the administration undergo to understand the implications of these fee increases.”

Under the 2004 Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act, parks keep 80 percent of the entrance fees collected on site and send the rest back to Washington, where the money supports other Park Service sites, most of which don’t charge for entry.

A little more than half of the fees a park collects must go toward deferred maintenance, often the unsexy infrastructure projects such as toilets and roads. Parks also must direct entrance-fee revenue toward transportation costs in the park, and if a park has shuttles, such as Zion or Rocky Mountain, those costs are high.

In the decade between 2005 and 2014, federal tax dollars for the National Park Service fell 8 percent, adjusted for inflation, while fee revenue and donations climbed 39 percent, according to a [2016 General Accounting Office report](#) that concluded the Park Service should raise the price of lifetime senior passes.

The Park Service did raise the price of its lifetime senior passes this summer — to \$80 from \$10 — spurring a deluge in last-minute demand for \$10 passes that created backlogs lingering for months after the passes were purchased.

Entrance fees remain vital for funding operations, maintenance and transportation. At Rocky Mountain

National Park, where there are almost \$75 million in overdue maintenance projects, gate fees account for about a third of its roughly \$18 million budget. The park had a record 4.5 million visitors in 2016.

If gate revenue drops, not only is deferred maintenance further delayed, but services — including shuttle buses to move those record crowds — could be cut.

The push to raise fees — 16 of the 17 parks already [raised entrance prices in 2015](#) after several months of public review — is part of an effort to address \$11.9 billion in deferred maintenance. The Park Service estimates the fee increase could raise \$70 million a year for those delayed projects. Some park advocates argue that the extra-large figure for deferred work is blown out of proportion to support a push for more fees and park concessionaires and, ultimately, more private control of public lands.

The Park Service's [2015 inventory of assets](#) showed that about \$2 billion of that deferred maintenance was “critical or serious” and “located in critical asset components.” And about half of the deferred maintenance (\$5.97 billion) was for paved roads, which are typically addressed in federal infrastructure funding bills.

“This is not a solution to the parks maintenance backlog, and it’s laughable for (Interior Secretary Ryan) Zinke to pretend the fee hike would even make a dent in it,” said Aaron Weiss, who is with the Center for Western Priorities, a nonprofit conservation and advocacy group, noting that \$70 million a year would take 170 years to fill the maintenance backlog. “This is simply a move to make America’s most popular national parks less accessible to middle- and lower-income families.”

[Pricing as crowd control is a common theme](#) among [the many opponents of the proposed fee increase](#). And as the Forest Service and National Park Service labor to [foster the next generation of public-lands advocates](#) with outreach programs in urban areas aimed at younger, more diverse populations, a more than doubling of entrance fees during the prime summer months seems to work counter to those efforts.

Peak pricing has long been an effective tool for dispersing crowds — think of the difference in price for a hotel or lift ticket at a ski resort over Christmas week versus late spring.

The American Recreation Coalition, which has spent decades lobbying for increased private-public partnerships on public lands, in October [sent a memo to Zinke](#) urging him to give concessionaires in public parks more leeway when it comes to adjusting prices for hotels and services inside national parks. The memo encouraged a “partial embrace of the partnership model used for ski areas on national forests,” where resorts set pricing while the Forest Service focuses on larger issues such as environmental management and visitor enjoyment.

“Generally speaking, we do believe that, for a park like Rocky Mountain or a park like Yellowstone, pricing is one tool to encourage people to come during less-crowded periods,” said Derrick Crandall, chief of the American Recreation Coalition, “but we never want the entrance fee to be something that would deter people from coming.”

Crandall thinks tracking visitor use through the bar-coded America the Beautiful pass could help the Park Service more equitably distribute revenue.

“We need a system that takes out the guessing and puts it into a scientific decision-making process,” Crandall said.

Annual passes have worked well in some states, including Washington, Texas and Michigan, where sales of annual state park passes have bolstered budgets.

Park Service spokesman Jeremy Barnum said the America the Beautiful pass already makes economic sense for travelers planning to visit more than three parks a year with entrance fees at \$30.

“There are a variety of factors that influence a visitor’s determination on what pass to purchase,”

Barnum said. “We don’t have estimates as to whether visitors are more likely to purchase the America the Beautiful pass under the proposed peak-season fee increase.”

But if the rules remain intact under the proposal, federal agencies could start competing against each other to lure visitors to buy their annual passes at individual locations, where 80 percent of the pass money stays. Imagine a marketing campaign urging visitors to drive to Estes Park to buy a pass at Rocky Mountain National Park or, perhaps, to bypass a Forest Service ranger station for a Bureau of Land Management office to make their purchases. Smaller, hard-to-reach parks probably would be pinched hardest.

Officials at individual parks declined to discuss the proposal, pushing questions to Washington, D.C.

The 30-day [public-input window for the plan ends Nov. 23](#).

“To uniformly make a predetermination about a \$70 fee seems inconsistent with the most recent policies addressing fee increases. It’s really best to find what would be a reasonable level based on the history of pricing for that park and those parks’ particular needs to make sure the pricing would not put it out of reach,” said David Nimkin, director of the southwest regional office for the National Parks Conservation Association, which for years has advocated for increased park funding. “Too many assumptions are made about how people should be able to afford this when, in fact, what we really want is to do is open our public lands and public spaces for all Americans.”

The proposed entrance fee hike comes as the [Trump administration budget cuts \\$1.5 billion](#) from the Interior Department, a 12 percent decrease to \$11.6 billion.

That mirrors decades of declining federal funds for public lands. Since the 1980s, the federal support for the Interior Department has dwindled by about 25 percent, adjusting for inflation. Federal appropriations for the Park Service fell 8 percent, adjusting for inflation, [between 2005 and 2014](#). Meanwhile, visitation is soaring, with [an all-time high of 331 million visitors](#) crowding national parks last year.

“We have tried everything in national parks to squeeze our dollars, enlisting more volunteers and searching for donors and matching programs but at the end, what we really need is more appropriations,” said Phil Francis, a Park Service veteran who now serves on the board of the [Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks](#). “We don’t know exactly what’s going to happen with this fee proposal, but I think people who are in lower economic brackets could easily be pushed out, and we certainly believe that we should do everything we can to attract as many people as we can to our parks.”