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The Hill

Committee pushes National Park Service to privatize campgrounds

By [Rebecca Beitsch](#) - 10/11/19 01:15 PM EDT

A committee that reports to the National Park Service (NPS) is recommending privatizing campgrounds within national parks, limiting benefits for senior visitors and allowing food trucks as a way to bring more money into the system.

The panel that shared the ideas was formed under former Interior Secretary [Ryan Zinke](#), part of the [Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee](#) designed to “advise the Secretary of the Interior on public-private partnerships across all public lands.”

The memo prepared by the Subcommittee on Recreation Enhancement Through Reorganization highlights privatization and an increase in contracts with private companies as a way to offer services such as Wi-Fi, food and equipment rentals to draw more visitors to parks.

The subcommittee called park campgrounds “the victims” of park infrastructure problems as the U.S. park service faces a \$12 billion maintenance backlog.

“There is also broad consensus that the current national park campground system, largely operated by federal employees, combines inadequate and outmoded visitor infrastructure,” the memo reads, saying campgrounds lack funds, have not kept up with demand and they fail “to meet expectations of the contemporary camping market.”

A spokesman for the Department of the Interior, which oversees NPS, said they have yet to be formally provided the [Sept. 24 memo](#).

“As we do with all recommendations that we get, we’ll review the report and respond accordingly but there has been no action taken on any of these recommendations,” Interior spokesman Nick Goodwin told The Hill.

Privatization has been a growing trend among state parks that have struggled to cover operations through park fees alone, with many seeking to bring in new recreational opportunities to attract visitors, such as archery lessons or ropes courses.

But privatizing campgrounds in national parks could be a polarizing idea, particularly since many view parks as a way to provide time in the outdoors to American’s of all stripes and don’t want to see some visitors priced out of visiting national treasures.

Jayson O’Neill, deputy director of the Western Values Project, a conservation group, said in a release that “the move would hurt working Americans, [and] it would fill the pockets of Trump donors who stand to benefit from lucrative contracts.”

Seniors are one group that might be hit hard by the policies, if adopted.

The memo argues that the 50 percent discount for seniors should apply only to base campsite fees and encourages NPS to introduce “new senior fee blackout periods during peak season periods.”

Derrick Crandall, vice chairman of the full committee and a counselor with the National Park Hospitality Association, [pushed Zinke](#) to expand concessioner opportunities and previously argued that many park functions could be performed by outside groups.

“Why is it inherently a Park Service responsibility to clean toilets, pick up trash and take reservations for campgrounds? Is that something that the agency has a particular expertise on, is it in their wheelhouse?” Crandall said shortly after the committee was formed.