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Community questions proposed fee for entrance into Lincoln debate site

BY CALEB HALE, The Southern

JONESBORO — The tranquil pond, tree-covered walking path and picnic tables of Lincoln Memorial Park in Jonesboro are popular among locals, but they question whether it's worth the \$5 price of admission the federal government wants to charge for entry.

The park – famous for being the third senatorial debate site between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 – has been owned by the Shawnee National Forest since 1934. The city of Jonesboro then sold it to the government for \$4,000, Mayor Ken Blandford said.

Residents in the town of roughly 1,900 have continued to use the site informally as a city park free of charge. Some even volunteer their time and service to the park's upkeep, Blandford said.

Now, the forest service plans to charge a \$5 per day, per vehicle fee to enter. The park is among several Southern Illinois sites being considered for new fees, including Garden of the Gods in Pope County and the Little Grand Canyon trailhead in Jackson County.

While Blandford doubts volunteers will agree to pay admission to mow the grass in the park, fellow city official Alderman Jimmy Watkins says a fee will chill locals on the idea of casual visits to the park.

“Nobody will use it, no body will want to pay \$5 to get in and have a picnic,” Watkins said. “I’m really aggravated with the federal government and the way they are handling it.”

Tim Pohlman, recreation program manager for the Shawnee National Forest, says fees are common in national forest sites but added the Jonesboro park is unique.

“Lincoln Memorial is a different kind of site. The forest service doesn’t typically manage those town park type of sites,” Pohlman said.

The budget for the forest service’s recreation operations has been going down in recent years, Pohlman said, and the proposed fees are meant to provide more money to supplement the loss.

“If we can’t provide a decent experience at our facilities because we can’t afford to maintain them, that to us seems more of a threat to attendance than fees,” he said.

Pohlman noted the proposed fees only apply to people who drive vehicles into the park; entry by foot would still be free. Those who volunteer maintenance services would also not be charged, and senior citizens may be given passes to enter for free, he added.

At least 80 percent of the fees collected from a specific site would go directly into maintenance for that particular site, said Shawnee National Forest spokeswoman Becky Banker.

“The whole concept is the money we get out of these fees will come back to us,” Banker said.

The fees are only a suggestion at this point, Banker added. The forest service is collecting public comments on all proposed fees until June 30.

Linda Hileman, a co-chair of the Jonesboro Lincoln-Douglas Debate Committee, which recently set up two statues in the park commemorating the event, has written a letter of protest on behalf of the group. She is urging others to do the same, fearing any fee charged on visitors will end what’s become a popular stop since the statues went up.

“You wouldn’t believe the people that are going out there,” Hileman said. “We have never been there when there wasn’t someone out there, and we go by about every day.”

A petition is also available for signing at Jonesboro City Hall for people who wish to protest the proposed fees, Blandford said.