

Sophie Says 10-08

THE RIGHT CALL

Shawnee National Forest Supervisor, Allen Nicholas, announced, "Based on several months of public comment, a final recreation fee proposal will be submitted for consideration." The proposal will be forwarded to the Regional Fee Board in Milwaukee, WI, where if approved will be forwarded to the Recreation Resource Advisory Council for consideration on October 8, 2008."

The proposal will ask for fee increases ONLY for developed campgrounds. In a news release, Nicholas noted that much of the opposition to fees came from the equestrian and day use communities.

Let's take a chronological look at why there was so much opposition. (1) Prior to the announcement of the proposed fees, the FS was still buying land and still closing facilities. Areas and amenities were being cut. So, the FS wanted us to pay MORE and get LESS. (2) I attended all three of the public comment meetings. At each meeting, specific questions were asked concerning the amount of fees, how the program was going to work, etc. The FS either didn't have an answer at the moment, or depending on what meeting you attended, the answers were inconclusive and widely varied. In other words, we were expected to comment on a fees system that at best, was not completely thought out! (3) After two letters to The U.S. Forest Service office, one letter from Congressman Shimkus, and a letter from the home office in Washington, it is obvious that equestrians come up on the short end of the stick when it came to amenities. SO....now once again, we have to pay MORE for LESS. The FS

stated that our amenity as equestrians was the trail! Sophie says, " I don't think so! " (4) Now after going through the public comment meetings (which, by the way, cost taxpayers money), publicizing the proposed fees in the media and giving handouts of explanation, Supervisor Nicholas made a statement to a commercial business by saying, "I don't know why you are so upset about the proposed fees...we might not even have them. I just threw this out to the public to see what kind of response we would get." Now...ain't that a good one! Do you call spending tax payers money, having 3 public meetings...just "throwing " it out there? When Ol Sophie heard this statement, her ears began to twitch....."I wonder."She said..."I just wonder if we might have wupped up on em?"

Thanks to the efforts of 10 county boards, 4784 signatures from citizens, many businesses and organizations, equestrians will NOT pay a fee for using the public trail system. It is very important to point out that both equestrian and other users of the forest were in vocal harmony over the opposition to the fees. There was to be a fee per car going to certain sites. Now, there will be NO fee. There was to be a fee per car to enter the Lincoln-Douglas Park in Jonesboro. Now, there will be NO fee. There was to be a fee per car to go to the Garden of the Gods. Now, there will be no fee.

In closing, remember, many opposed the fees on the basis of being double taxed. Others felt the money was not and would not be spent properly. And finally, others felt like you should get something for your money.

The fees controversy did something in southern Illinois that was quite remarkable. It brought together a diverse recreational family. This has never happened on such a scale. Groups,

organizations, government agencies, all pulled together. Truly there is strength in numbers. Now these numbers must continue their vigil. They must watch and act for the future. The U.S. Forest Service has a problem with accountability and WE need to help them.

Someone said....."Well we won!" I guess you could say that, but I prefer to look at it in another way. The outcome was not about winners and losers, rather it was about WHAT IS RIGHT!

Ol Sophie says, "Folks, we almost couldn't see the forest for the fees!" "Until next month, I'm all ears!"