



Gettysburg battlefield museum fee plan takes flak

By ERIN JAMES
Evening Sun Reporter

Article Launched: 09/19/2008 11:46:46 AM EDT



Gettysburg National Military Park Superintendent John Latschar speaks to the crowd during Thursday night's public hearing at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center. The hearing was held to gather comments on a proposal to charge \$7.50 admission to the museum. (Evening Sun Photo by Brett Berwager)

Purchase reprints of Evening Sun Photos at EveningSunPhotos.Com.

More than anything, Craig Lorden said, he is "saddened" by the possibility of a \$7.50 admission fee becoming reality at the new Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center.

The park's thousands of artifacts are what draw people to the new facility, and they should be available free of charge to the public, Lorden said.

"I don't think this place is an amusement park," he said. "I think it's something special."

The Gettysburg resident shared his thoughts with

the nearly 100 others who showed up at a public hearing Thursday about a proposal to charge an admission fee for the museum exhibits.

Since its opening in April, the new center has been available to the public for free - a promise of the National Park Service since its general-management plan and its proposal to build a new visitor center was adopted in 1999.

Only the center's "interpretive venues" - a film that explains the Battle of Gettysburg within the context of the Civil War and the newly restored Cyclorama painting that depicts Pickett's Charge - come with a cost.

But five months into the operation of the new building, officials say they're not making the money they expected to make.

About 1 million people have walked through the doors of the new visitor center since April 14, but only between 18 and 24 percent have paid the \$8 fee to see the 22-minute film titled "A New Birth of Freedom."

Revenue projections had figured on a third of visitors buying tickets.

When the newly restored Cyclorama painting opens to the public next week, the price to see both attractions is supposed to jump to \$12. But officials say they don't expect the disappointing trend to change when prices go up.

If nothing is done, the Gettysburg Foundation - the park's private partner that is behind the admission-fee proposal - expects to lose \$1.78 million annually.

Lorden said he understands the park's dilemma, but he urged officials to consider other options before

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



making a final decision.

"I'm just sad that it's not paying for you the way you need it to pay," he said.

Park and foundation officials say they have little choice but to alter the museum's fee structure. Without a change that increases revenue, the Gettysburg Foundation won't be able to meet its financial obligations.

But officials also say they're open to suggestions. That's the reason for Thursday's public hearing and a public-comment period that lasts until Sept. 29.

The majority of those who spoke at the hearing said they opposed the admission-fee proposal, and many made suggestions they believe may increase revenue without imposing a \$7.50 fee on any adult who walks through the door.

A few said they support the foundation's proposal.



Businessman Eric Uberman questions Gettysburg National Military Park Superintendent John Latschar during Thursday night's public hearing at the museum and visitor center to gather comments on a proposal to charge \$7.50 admission to the museum. (Evening Sun Photo by Brett Berwager)

Purchase reprints of Evening Sun Photos at EveningSunPhotos.Com.

Others asked Park Superintendent John Latschar if an admission fee to the museum is a sign of more fees to come.

Longtime park service critic and local businessman Eric Uberman said the public has reason to be skeptical about the park's plans because other promises have been made and broken.

He mentioned the use of tax dollars to build the

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



center as an example, though park officials say that money - part of which came from federal and state grants - was not solicited.

Uberman questioned whether a charge to see the battlefield might be another revenue source for the foundation if the center continues to bring in too little money.

"Is this a pre-warning of what's to come?" Uberman asked.

Gettysburg businessman Bob Monahan echoed those sentiments, saying he doesn't believe an admission fee will be the last change.

"Is this just the beginning?" he asked. "I worry about where this is all headed."

The question didn't get a direct response from Latschar, though he said later that a battlefield admission fee is neither practical for Gettysburg nor in the park's plans.

Gene Golden, another Gettysburg business owner, wondered why such a significant change needs to be made after only five months of operation.

"Why not give it another year?" he asked.

Latschar likened the park's tourist season to the busiest time for a retail store around the holidays.

Ninety percent of the park's visitors come during the spring or summer, and a change needs to be made before that time period arrives again in 2009, Latschar said.

"We just finished our Christmas shopping season," he said. "We can't afford to wait another full season."

Golden got applause from the crowd when he made

the point that it will take 52,364 admission fees at \$7.50 each to pay the salary of the Gettysburg Foundation's president, Robert Wilburn. Wilburn made \$392,735 between 2006 and 2007, according to the foundation's tax filings.

"When a business isn't doing well, usually the owner ... takes a little hit with it," Golden said.

In response, Latschar explained that Wilburn's salary comes primarily from the foundation's membership and development budget - not from the operations budget, where admission fees would show up as revenue.

Latschar also said Wilburn is among the best fundraisers in the country and that he has been successful in raising \$108 million so far for the construction of the visitor center and for other preservation projects.

"You get what you pay for," he said. "There's only a certain amount of people who can raise that kind of money."

But another man, Cal Ducette, reiterated Golden's statement, saying the foundation obviously has financial problems.

"What does a baseball team do?" he said. "You change management."

Walton Jones said he believes the museum and its artifacts should be available to the public for free. "Americans have a right to view these relics free of charge," he said.

Jones is married to the granddaughter of Emily and George Rosensteel, the couple who, in 1921, opened the Gettysburg National Museum. In 1971, the family sold both the museum and 38,000 artifacts to the National Park Service.

Advertisement

A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



The Rosensteel family never charged a fee to see the artifacts, and they were sold to the park in that spirit, Jones said.

York resident Mark Allen said he attended the hearing not because of his interest in business practices but because he is a Civil War enthusiast who frequently visits the museum.

There are others like him, and Allen said he's worried frequent visitors may be prevented from making return trips if an admission fee is adopted.

"We come here to learn," he said.

Latschar will make the final decision on the foundation's proposal, something that could happen as soon as Sept. 30.

TO COMMENT:

Interested members of the public may comment in writing to Park Superintendent John Latschar, Gettysburg National Military Park, 1195 Baltimore Pike, Suite 100, Gettysburg, PA, 17325. Or they may e-mail comments to GETT_Superintendent@nps.gov. All comments must be received by Sept. 29.

Advertisement

A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™