

'Unhappy Camper Tax' in Saskatchewan Parks

Woodall's Campground Management
Tuesday, December 16, 2008

Dubbing it an "unhappy camper tax," the New Democratic Party (NDP) of Canada says the government's wide-ranging fee hikes at Saskatchewan provincial parks should be dumped.

Opposition Member of the Legislative Assembly John Nilson said the Saskatchewan Party pledged it would keep camping rates affordable for residents of the province after forming the government late last year, yet on Friday (Dec. 12) announced a slate of fee hikes without a clear explanation, according to *The Regina (Saskatchewan) Leader-Post*.

"I know that many campers are reconsidering their summer plans for next summer because of these increases, so I think the government should reconsider the ill-advised Christmas present to Saskatchewan campers," said Nilson.

Meanwhile, the Saskatchewan Party cabinet minister responsible for parks backed away on Monday from her earlier suggestion that cheap fees at parks could actually be off-putting to campers.

But Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport Minister Christine Tell argued there is sound reasoning behind the changes, which include a \$2 increase to the daily camping fee, the doubling of the reservation service fee to \$10 and a new \$7 charge when reservations are changed.

The cost of seasonal campsites goes up, including an increase from \$830 to \$1,500 for those with electricity that are located near washroom services centers.

Tell had said that under-valuing the parks could have a psychological impact on would-be campers.

"People thought maybe it's so cheap that maybe we were not going to come and visit the parks," Tell said Friday.

She said Monday that she had done a poor job of explaining what the government is doing.

"I don't think for one minute that it stopped people from coming," she said of the old fees.

The aim with the fee increases is to "re-balance" the percentage that government pays for the parks, versus the park users.

"The traditional percentage is 60% user pay and 40% government. We are not – even with the increases in the camping rates – we are not even there at the 60%, 40% government," Tell said, adding the user portion will be 56%.

Parks Were 'Under-valued'

"When we looked at the increased costs in managing a park, whether it be staffing costs, fixing up the construction on a particular piece of property like the washrooms and the shower facilities, those costs have increased. And so we're attempting to re-balance what has traditionally been the percentage of user pay and government pay."

But she also reiterated that the parks were being under-valued, particularly when it came to rates for seasonal camping.

"We are charging right now, prior to the increase, almost what it would cost to store a person's motorhome."

Regional parks also use the provincial parks as rate-makers for seasonal campers, and needed an increase to deal with rising costs, she said.

But Nilson pointed to a mandate letter sent to Tell last year by Premier Brad Wall, in which he instructed the new minister to deliver on the government's commitment to improve Saskatchewan's parks by "keeping camping rates affordable for Saskatchewan residents."

And while a 2008 camper survey asked about whether there should be a mix of taxes and visitor fees to generate operating funds and whether camping permits were a good value, it didn't ask about how campers would feel about fee increases, Nilson said.

"I think what they need to do is make sure that they talk to the public before they do something like this. It's very clear from their consultation that they didn't ask the question about raising the fees in this way at all."

The fee increases have also been criticized as hypocritical by the NDP, because the Saskatchewan Party used to frequently slam the \$3-a-day campfire fee, decrying it as a "wiener roast tax" that they canceled once in government.

The fee increases announced Friday will mean \$1.25 million more for government each year.

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