

Verde Independent

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Public's help sought with Red Rock Pass

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Staff Reporter

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SEDONA - There are few public lands that see as much traffic the Red Rock Ranger District sees on an average day.

In fact the red rock country gets more visitors annually than many National Parks.

Realizing the impact of so many visitors, the district instituted the Red Rock Pass Program several years ago so it could afford the amenities needed to lessen the impact.

But last year a federal magistrate ruled that the pass program could no longer continue in the manner it was being administrated.

Ever since then, managers on the Coconino National Forest, along with some outside help, have been trying to figure out what to do.

On Thursday March 24, the public will have an opportunity to view some of the proposed solutions and render their opinion, during an open house from 4 p.m. and 7 p.m., at Sedona Red Rock High School.

The Red Rock Pass Program brings in just over \$1 million to the district. Of that, 95 percent stays within the 166,350-acre Red Rock Pass area.

The revenue from the pass program pays for a fully-staffed, seven-day a week visitor center, restrooms, picnic facilities, trail maintenance, trash collection and protection of the surrounding countryside and its wildlife. It also supports cultural sites such as V Bar V, Palatki and Honanki.

Without the additional revenue, managers fear that funding received from the federal government and other sources would not be enough to keep up with visitor impact.

Their challenge is to strike a balance between the needs of the public lands and the ruling of the court.

The court has said that the Forest Service can only charge a fee where amenities are provided. The Forest Service's argument that the entire Red Rock Pass area is akin to a National Park and the pass like an admission fee was overruled.

Among the scenarios visitors will have to contemplate at Thursday's meeting are to 1) keep it like it is, 2) remove all fees, 3) shrink the boundaries of the pass area, 4) charge fees only in areas that have full amenities, 5) split the Red Rock Pass area into several smaller areas, and 6) turn it over to concessionaires.

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