

Avid Smokies hiker seeks access to comments collected over park backcountry fee

By Morgan Simmons

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Ever since Great Smoky Mountains National Park proposed a new user fee on backcountry camping, John Quillen has been on a crusade.

A self-employed drug counselor and avid backpacker from Knoxville, the 45-year-old Quillen is vehemently opposed to the proposal, and he is convinced most people who have a stake in the matter are, too.

To prove his point, Quillen recently filed a [Freedom of Information Act](#) request with the National Park Service to obtain copies of the 1,000-plus comments received last summer during the public comment period. The park service said it would comply with Quillen's request, but would charge him a \$1,200 copying and searching charge.

In response, Quillen has retained an attorney. An appeal of the fee is under way.

"I'd bet the farm that the comments were overwhelmingly negative," Quillen said. "The park doesn't want to release that information, in my opinion."

The proposed fee would pay for an online reservation system and 24-hour call center for all the park's backcountry campsites and shelters. Currently, reservations are required at all the park's trail shelters and at only 26 of the park's most popular backcountry campsites.

The fee would also pay to hire two backcountry rangers who would check campsites to prevent crowding that can damage natural resources and lead to food storage problems and encourage nuisance bears.

The park's three fee options include \$10 per reservation plus \$5 per person; \$10 reservation plus \$2.25 per person per night; or a simplified option of \$4 per person per night.

Among those rallying against the proposal are guidebook author Johnny Molloy, and Jim Casada, author of "Fly Fishing in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park: An Insiders Guide to a Pursuit of Passion."

The park's backcountry camping peaked in 1996 with 102,022 camper nights. In the last five years backcountry camping has averaged just under 80,000 camper nights each year. In 2010, the estimated number of backcountry camper nights was 79,480.

Quillen and other critics of the fee say the Smokies' backcountry isn't as crowded as the park claims.

"Hiring two rangers to cruise the empty backcountry is a waste of taxpayers' money," Quillen said. "Why is the park bringing this up now when backcountry camping has been on the decline?"

Park officials say the two rangers hired to patrol the park's 800 square miles would concentrate their efforts on the the park's most popular campgrounds that suffer most from overcrowding as a result of users showing up without a reservation.

Park spokesman Bob Miller cited Icewater Springs shelter along the Appalachian Trail as a site that frequently is over-occupied.

Unlike a number of national parks, the Smokies has never charged a backcountry camping fee, and it's the only major national park that doesn't charge an entrance fee.

Responding to charges that the proposed backcountry camping fee is tantamount to an entrance fee, Miller said the park already charges similar user fees for frontcountry camping and wedding permits.

Miller said the park isn't conducting a "straw poll" with the pubic comments but rather is using public input to identify substantive concerns related to the proposal.

"The park is not going to profit from this," Miller said. "We're not proposing the fee just to aggravate people. The only way we can contemplate this is if we can improve on the services we're not satisfied with."

Miller said it is "very unlikely" the park will reach a final decision on the backcountry camping fee before next summer in 2012.



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