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Maroon Lake bike fee proposal hits bump with Aspen leaders, cyclists

A committee's suggestion to charge cyclists to ride to Maroon Lake is being met with sharp criticism from the Aspen cycling community. And the chairman of the Pitkin County Board of Commissioners said Thursday that the possible fee implementation would run counter to the community's desire to encourage alternative modes of transportation to one of the Aspen area's most popular destinations.

"I'm sure we would come out strongly opposed to that," said County Commissioner George Newman.

At a Wednesday meeting with U.S. Forest Service officials in Glenwood Springs, members of the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee floated the idea of charging cyclists to ride from the Forest Service's pay station, 5.5 miles up Maroon Creek Road from the Highway 82 roundabout, toward or to where the road ends at Maroon Lake. The amount of the possible fee was not discussed.

Committee members said it seems reasonable to charge bicyclists because motorists must pay to drive to Maroon Lake, which sits at the foot of the Maroon Bells, two of the most photographed peaks in North America. Charging motorists but not cyclists comes across as unfair, they said.

A guided bus service, which departs from Aspen Highlands, is provided to Maroon Lake visitors from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the peak summer season, June 15 through Sept. 2. Costs are \$6 for adults and \$4 for youth ages 6 to 16 and seniors older than 65. Children younger than 6 don't pay.

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Charlie Tarver

Owner, Hub at Aspen bike shop

Vehicles are not allowed during the 9-to-5 time frame, and motorists are charged \$10 before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. during the high season.

The Forest Service, however, recently decided not to charge motorists to drive to the Stein Meadow Overlook, roughly three miles up Maroon Creek Road from the pay station. The reason: The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which Congress passed in 2004, expires next year. The act allowed the Forest Service to charge fees to help offset the costs associated with its upkeep of such facilities as bathrooms and picnic tables, among other things.

Waiving a fee to Stein Meadow users, which took effect Memorial Day weekend, as well as implementing one for cyclists, would be at odds with the community's wishes, Newman said.

“(The county's) goal, as well as the community's goal, has been to discourage vehicles from going up there by supporting the bus system and encouraging other modes of transportation,” he said.

Maroon Lake Road is managed by the county, while the nearby campgrounds, parking areas and rest-area facilities are maintained by the Forest Service.

Outgoing Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland, who said he rides to Maroon Lake as many as 30 times annually — “Some people go up there 100 times,” he said — argued that charging cyclists but waiving a fee for Stein Meadow-bound motorists would undermine a system that's been in place since 1983. Then, local government began to limit vehicles on Maroon Creek Road as an environmental measure.

He also noted that both the county and the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority's arrangement for the bus service — annually subsidized by \$100,000 that comes from sales tax coffers — has achieved its desired effect of making the area accessible and mitigating environmental impacts.

“The community spends \$100,000 a year to make buses available,” Ireland said. “And we do that to make (Maroon Creek Road) convenient for kids and seniors and to make the road safe for roller-bladers, ski-skaters, cyclists.”

Likewise, Charlie Tarver, owner of the Hub at Aspen bicycle shop and himself an avid cyclist, offered stinging criticism of the idea.

“I think it's absurd. And here is why: The cost to the Forest Service to maintain the route up the (Maroon) Bells and back for a bicycle is infinitesimal when compared to the upkeep associated with the automobile.”

Both Ireland and Tarver noted that the bicycle ride up Maroon Creek Road is one of the county's safest because of limited vehicle access. Because of the vehicle restrictions and fees, intermediate cyclists can ride to Maroon Lake with not nearly the safety threat that might go with riding Castle Creek Road to the ghost town of Ashcroft or riding Highway 82 to the Continental Divide.

“Aspen has this huge cyclist population and a visitor base of road cyclists,” Tarver said. “We have narrow, skinny roads with no shoulders and narrow, windy roads with no shoulders.

“The (ride to the) Bells is the only place where intermediate riders can go safely and enjoy this. What will happen if they charge money is all the riders will go to Ashcroft, and the amount of car-bicycle interfaces will skyrocket.”

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