

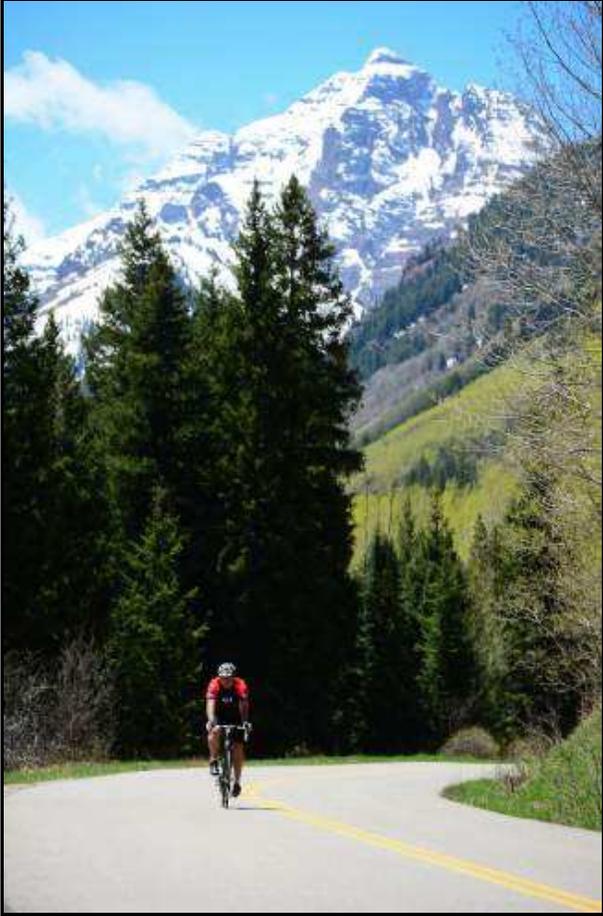


Scott Condon

scondon@aspentimes.com

June 6, 2013

Bike fee urged for Maroon Lake



Leigh Vogel/The Aspen Times A cyclist cruises downhill on Maroon Creek Road on a recent sunny afternoon. An advisory committee made a surprise recommendation to the U.S. Forest Service Wednesday to consider charging cyclists a fee to ride to Maroon Lake.

The U.S. Forest Service was urged by a citizen committee Wednesday to charge a fee for cyclists riding to Maroon Lake.

The surprise, informal recommendation came from members of the obscure Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee. The volunteer board advises the regional forester on issues related to fees on national-forest lands in Colorado.

The nine members of the committee who attended the meeting were discussing changes that the Forest Service is making to the fee system at Maroon Bells when the topic of fees for bikers popped up without prior notice.

“What’s the rationale for not charging cyclists anything?” asked committee member Don Riggle, a Colorado Springs resident who represents summer motorized recreation.

Rich Doak, lands and staff recreation officer for the White River National Forest Supervisor’s Office, explained that when the \$10 fee was put in place for vehicles driving to the Maroon Bells, Aspen residents fought a fee for cyclists.

“There was strong, organized opposition to charging bicycles,” Doak said.

The Aspen district ranger at the time made the decision not to implement the fee, according to Doak.

Committee Chairwoman Janelle Kukuk, who represents winter motorized recreation, said that if cyclists use the same facilities as motorists at Maroon Lake, it seems like they also should pay a fee.

Riggle said there is an “inequity” in the application of the fee that the Forest Service should address.

Doak said he was in a position of defending a policy that he didn’t necessarily agree with regarding a fee for motorists but not cyclists.

“I agree — it’s a fairness issue,” he said.

Steve Pittel, a committee member representing motorized outfitters and guides, strayed off topic by complaining about the lack of a fee for cross-country skiers on Vail Pass. He also expressed frustration that mountain bikers cause as much trail damage as any forest visitor but face minimal regulation.

Doak noted that the ride to Maroon Lake is on a paved road and doesn’t involve any off-trail issues.

No members of the committee are from the Roaring Fork Valley. Most members were from Summit and Eagle counties or closer to the Front Range. The committee’s meetings are open, but there is little advance notice. No one representing Aspen’s cycling community attended the meeting.

Committee member Bret Roller, a representative of environmental groups, predicted that the Aspen cycling community will get engaged if the the Forest Service considers the recommendation to charge a fee for cyclists.

“When this does become a fight, it will be a big one,” Roller said.

Road cyclists seem to be influential with local governments in Colorado mountain towns, Roller said, adding that he didn’t know why.

“They’re all in spandex. They don’t seem that intimidating,” he quipped.

Kukuk said she has been around cyclists when food is available and discovered that people in spandex can be intimidating. Most committee members got a chuckle out of that.

The ride to Maroon Lake is one of the most popular routes for Aspen residents and visitors because of stunning scenery, a great workout and limited traffic.

The Forest Service has worked with Pitkin County and the predecessor of the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority to limit vehicles in the Maroon Creek Valley and promote bus use since 1983. It's mandatory for visitors to take a bus from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the heart of the summer, with a few exceptions. Handicapped motorists can drive, as can those traveling with a child who must be in a restrained seat.

Maroon Lake received about 112,000 visitors between Memorial Day and late September last year, including 200 to 300 cyclists per day, according to Doak.

Motorists are charged the \$10 fee before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. during the heart of summer and throughout the day in the spring and fall offseasons, when the bus isn't running. Cyclists pay nothing.

A fee was first authorized in the early 1990s under a federal program called Fee Demonstration. It was institutionalized with passage of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act by Congress in 2004. It gives the Forest Service the ability to charge a fee when it offers services for facilities such as bathrooms, interpretive signs, picnic tables and the like. The money raised must be spent to enhance and improve the areas where it is collected.

The act expires next year and is likely headed toward congressional hearings on reauthorization, according to Jim Bedwell, of the regional forester's office. Fee foes are trying to block reauthorization. The Forest Service is looking at all its sites to make sure they are "meeting the letter of the law," Bedwell said.

Forest Service officials decided that requires tweaking the fee system in the Maroon Creek Valley. Motorists who say they are going to the Stein Meadow Overlook, roughly 5.5 miles southwest of Aspen on Maroon Creek Road, won't be charged the fee. The overlook consists of 15-minute timed parking spaces but no other amenities, such as a bathroom.

Doak said if travelers continue on to Maroon Lake and use facilities, they would be charged the fee. The Forest Service has limited staffing to enforce the rule, he acknowledged.

The Recreation Resource Advisory Committee voted to endorse the change in policy, though Riggle and Pittel voted against it. Riggle asked the committee to delay a vote so the Forest Service could be asked to review the entire fee-collection system at Maroon Lake. Without that broader review, he said, he couldn't support the elimination of the fee for people driving to Stein Meadow Overlook.

"I don't like what's in front of me right now, OK?" he explained to the other board members. The bigger-picture issue is being "kicked down the street because it's too hard to deal with," Riggle said. "There's a bigger (issue) being ignored."

Pittel agreed that the entire fee- collection system needs to be "revisited" and should include cyclists.

The seven other board members voted to accept the proposal. Kukuk said the committee could send a message to Forest Service officials, via Doak and Bedwell, that a fee for cyclists should be examined.

Doak said he would take the issue up with officials in the White River National Forest. Bedwell said the discussion of the fee for bikes would be reported to the regional forester's office as part of the committee's vote. A fee for bikes would have to be a separate proposal, he said.

scondon@aspentimes.com

