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Idea of fee for ride to Bells leaves Aspen bikers spinning

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Members of Aspen's cycling community reacted with a mix of opposition and resignation on Thursday to the idea of being charged a fee to ride up to the Maroon Bells.

The idea isn't yet a formal proposal; it was floated Wednesday night at a meeting of the volunteer Recreation Advisory Committee for the White River National Forest.

Still, many bike shop owners and mechanics in Aspen predicted that the concept would meet with stiff opposition if Forest Service employees decide to advance it through a formal public review process.

"They have tried it before and it's illogical," said Charlie Tarver, owner of the Hub of Aspen bike shop, who was active in the public debate around the decision to first charge motorists driving up to the Bells in 1983.

"One of the original reasons for discouraging autos was the destruction of the [Maroon Creek] valley by fumes," he said. "The degradation caused by cars versus bicycles is a billion to one."

The question of why cyclists aren't currently charged to ride to the Bells was resurrected Wednesday night by Don Riggle, a Colorado Springs resident who represents the interests of motor sports enthusiasts on the advisory committee.

When Riggle raised the issue, the committee was discussing a separate question of whether to waive the \$10 fee for drivers who proceed only to the Stein Meadow Overlook off of Maroon Creek Road, rather than all the way to the Maroon Bells.

The committee voted to approve that proposal.

Under current rules, drivers heading to the Bells are charged \$10 in the early morning and evening hours during peak summer season, the only time private autos may proceed past the entry kiosk (bus service is available from Aspen Highlands during the day). The fee applies all day in the spring and fall. Cyclists are charged nothing.

The advisory committee is comprised of 11 members representing commercial outfitters, recreational interests and tribal or government interests who use the White River National Forest.

Under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004, the committee is charged with reviewing new forest access fees or changes to existing fees that are proposed by staff in forest district offices. Their input is non-binding.

“People have to apply to be on the committee, and it is a volunteer position,” said Rich Doak, the lands and staff recreation officer for the White River National Forest supervisor’s office.

Although there are currently no representatives from the Roaring Fork Valley on the advisory committee, Doak noted that two positions will be opening soon, and he said the forest is now accepting applications.

Typically, members of the advisory committee do not suggest rule changes, as Riggle did on Wednesday. Those changes, Doak said, instead come from Forest Service staff in district offices throughout the nine counties that contain parts of the White River National Forest.

After several members of the advisory committee opined on Wednesday night that it’s unfair to charge cars but not bikers to access the Bells, Doak said he’s considering whether to propose a formal rule that would require bikers to pay a fee at the entry kiosk on Maroon Creek Road.

“I will be talking to the district ranger, forest supervisor, and the staff on the Aspen district. We will sit down and have a serious conversation about whether to move this forward,” he said.

If the idea advances, Forest Service officials would initiate a formal — and likely contentious — public comment process. After that, the idea would proceed again to the Recreation Advisory Committee for a vote, then to the forest’s regional manager in Denver for final consideration.

The regional manager, Doak said, would have the authority to disagree with the advisory committee’s vote on the issue, although he said that rarely happens.

Should the idea of charging cyclists become a formal proposal, some Aspen bikers on Thursday offered a preview of their opposition to the idea.

Many raised concerns that charging a fee to ride Maroon Creek Road would push more cyclists onto nearby Castle Creek Road, which offers a similar ride, albeit with more auto traffic.

“It would be phenomenally unsafe to put half the riders who are now on the Bells onto Castle Creek,” said Tarver. “And shifting use to another road would increase costs by requiring more county services.”

Kevin Byford, a co-owner of Aspen Bike Rentals, said instituting a biker fee for the Bells would have a disproportionate impact on local cyclists.

“People who are out here for a week probably won’t care about spending an extra \$10 to ride up the road,” he said. “I think it would be more the locals who would react, and start riding Castle Creek more.”

Some employees of Aspen bike shops took a more moderate view, noting that cyclists entering national parks such as Yellowstone are required to pay fees to assist with the upkeep of facilities there.

“As long as the rate is reasonable, it’s not that unheard of,” said Brian Marsh, a mechanic at Ute City Cycles. “We are all using the same infrastructure, so why not put money into it?”

Michael Wampler, owner of Aspen Velo, said that if forest officials do decide to charge a fee, he hopes that they offer a season pass to locals at a discount. In any case, he said, if the idea advances, “I think you will see cyclists rally like you haven’t seen them rally in a long time.”

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