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The Denver Post

## Fee climbs for Mount Evans access as Denver adds \$5 Summit Lake charge

**Visitors to one of Colorado's drive-up 14ers could shell out \$15 for access to the government-owned amenities at the summit**

**By Jason Blevins**

*The Denver Post*

Posted: 05/12/2016



Lauren Mossberg, 18, looks out over the mountains from the summit of Mount Evans on Thursday, July 5, 2012. (*Denver Post* file)

The cost of strolling around one of Colorado's drive-up 14ers will climb to \$15 this summer, when Denver starts collecting a \$5 fee for access to the city-owned Summit Lake Park on Mount Evans.

Visitors can pay a la carte — \$10 to access both the U.S. Forest Service's Mount Evans summit-viewing platform and the Mount Goliath interpretive area, and \$5 for Summit Lake — or pay nothing for an up-and-back drive on the [Mount Evans Scenic Byway](#).

Fees on Mount Evans have been a source of lawsuits and angst for years, and fee-fighters see the latest Denver plan as yet another charge to access taxpayer-funded lands.

"Whether this looks like a fee increase is questionable. It's a different way of administering the fees. It creates more choice," said Bob Finch, the director of natural resources for Denver's parks and recreation department.

For 15 years, the Forest Service charged all Mount Evans visitors a \$10 fee and sent about \$45,000 back to the city in a revenue-sharing deal that covered the cost of a Forest Service employee's cleaning the city-owned restrooms and patrolling Summit Lake Park.

But [the fee was dropped in 2012, after users sued](#) saying the agency didn't have the right to charge people who were just driving along the state highway or were entering the wilderness area and not accessing the designated fee areas on Mount Evans.

Dropping the \$10 fee followed a 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision that overturned a similar fee the Forest Service charged visitors to Mount Lemmon in Arizona. The ruling found the agency had incorrectly interpreted the 2005 Federal Land Recreation Enhancement Act, which allows the Forest Service to collect "amenity fees" for "high impact" recreation areas but prohibits them charging folks who are simply passing through without using improvements such as trails, parking lots and restrooms.

After the settlement, the revenue-sharing deal was abandoned and Denver had to create its own fee-collecting authority. Last year, Denver tried collecting \$5 at a kiosk at Summit Lake Park, where visitors could put the fee in an envelope and drop it in a locked tube. That didn't work so well, with the city paying someone to drive up there every couple days to collect the sporadic deposits.

In 2014, the Forest Service collected \$353,842 from roughly 150,000 visitors who passed through the Mount Evans kiosk at the base of the mountain at Echo Lake. The agency collected another \$86,750 from multiproperty federal lands passholders in 2014.

The new program has the Forest Service collecting Denver's fee along with its own.

"For visitor convenience, we are going to sell both passes at the base at the welcome station," said Reid Armstrong of the Arapaho National Forest.

Fee opponents who supported the lawsuit against the Forest Service's Mount Evans fees remain opposed to the Denver fee.

Summit Lake used to be part of the \$10 fee, said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which has advocated for fee-free access to public lands since 2001.

"Now it's going to be \$15 to use the three developed sites," Benzar said. "So overall, it feels like the price is climbing but will cover less. Not to mention this is all way too complicated to explain to Joe Sixpack from New Jersey at the fee booth as traffic backs up behind him."

Finch is quick to point out that every penny of the city's \$5 fee goes back into improvements, maintenance and patrols at Summit Lake Park and the city-owned Echo Lake Park at the base. The city hopes to collect about \$35,000 a year, Finch said. The city has spent about \$300,000 in recent improvements — including a new trail — at the two parks.

The fee will support a city ranger who will spend five days a week at Mount Evans patrolling and enforcing city rules like the prohibition against walking on the tundra around Summit Lake. Mount Evans is [expected to open for the season on May 27.](#)

"We need a presence up there and with Mount Evans being so far from the city, this fee really helps us out," Finch said. "It's so beautiful up there. This will help us do what we need to do up there, which is protect the resource and keep people safe."

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