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Gate fee at Rocky Mountain National Park could hit \$70 next year to fund long-deferred park maintenance

By [Jason Blevins](#) Oct 24, 2017, 1:34 pm

A year after celebrating its 100th anniversary with record crowds, the National Park Service is proposing steep increases in entry fees, more than doubling the peak-season gate fee to \$70 at Rocky Mountain National Park and the 16 other busiest parks.

The “targeted fee increases” are intended to fund overdue improvements to aging infrastructure, including park roads, bridges, campgrounds, waterlines, restrooms and visitor centers, U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said in a statement announcing the proposal.

“We need to have the vision to look at the future of our parks and take action in order to ensure that our grandkids’ grandkids will have the same if not better experience than we have today,” Zinke said. “Shoring up our parks’ aging infrastructure will do that.”

Rocky Mountain National Park two years ago [raised the cost of its weekly vehicle pass to \\$30 from \\$20](#). On Jan. 1, the park [raised the annual pass fee to \\$60 from \\$50](#) but kept its weekly vehicle pass at \$30.

Last year’s “Find Your Park” campaign and centennial celebration fueled record visitation at national parks across the country, straining capacity and prompting talk of permits, caps and increased fees to help mitigate crowding. Visitation to national parks topped 300 million for the first time in 2015 and peaked at 331 million last year.

Visitors at Zion National Park last summer waited more than 90 minutes to park their car and catch a shuttle, fueling a record 4.3 million visits at the Utah park. Over Memorial Day weekend last year at Arches National Park, which reached 1.6 million visits in 2016, traffic backed up onto U.S. 191, prompting the Utah Highway Patrol to temporarily close the park entrance. At Yellowstone National Park — 4.3 million visits in 2016 — passing through the entrance at West Yellowstone took more than three hours in July.

Rocky Mountain National Park set visitation records in 2014, 2015 and 2016, reaching 4.52 million visitors last year. Through September, the park is on pace with the previous year, with 3.86 million visitors.

With at least \$12 billion in deferred maintenance and backlogged improvement projects, the proposed new fee structure would grow park service revenue by \$70 million a year, marking a 34 percent increase over the \$200 million the service collected in 2016. Federal law requires 80 percent of park fees to remain in the park where they are collected and 20 percent is directed toward projects in other parks.

Raising gate fees during the parks’ five busiest months balances the need to generate revenue for needed improvements while still “providing value” to visitors, said Jeremy Barnum, the head of public affairs for the park service.

“The proposed pricing structure will likely generate significant new revenues that will positively impact our busiest national parks while maintaining existing prices in the vast majority of national park sites,” Barnum said.

Theresa Pierno, chief of the National Parks Conservation Association, a parks advocacy group, said the mounting bill for deferred maintenance should not be shouldered by visitors alone, [noting a 12 percent cut — about \\$1.5 billion — to the park service budget](#) proposed by the Trump administration.

“If the administration wants to support national parks, it needs to walk the walk and work with Congress to address the maintenance backlog,” she said in a statement.

Public comment on the proposed entry fees — which also apply to commercial operators — is open through Nov. 23 at parkplanning.nps.gov.

The fee increases would be implemented May 1 at Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Olympic, Sequoia & Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite and Zion; June 1 at Acadia, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain and Shenandoah; and as soon as possible in 2018 at Joshua Tree.

During the peak season, the entrance fee would be \$70 for a private vehicle; \$50 for a motorcycle; and \$30 for a visitor on foot or bike. Park-specific annual passes would cost \$75 and the annual “America the Beautiful” pass, which is good for all federal lands, would remain \$80.

The proposed seasonal fee system means the \$20 one-day pass at Rocky Mountain National Park will not be available June through October, park spokeswoman Kyle Patterson said. That would mark a \$50 increase for daytrippers accessing the park.

“We expect a variety of comments on the proposal because people love national parks,” National Park Service spokesman Jeffrey Olson said. “We see lots of initial comments on social media platforms, but we’re looking for more than that. We encourage people to read the proposal closely and to comment on it within the next 30 days.”

Overcrowding is straining more than national parks, especially in Colorado, where the tourism industry boasts record traffic year after year. Land managers with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are [laboring to accommodate the growing crowds](#). The notion that Colorado’s jewels are being loved to death is emerging as a common theme across the state, where the state’s fourteeners, backcountry destinations and popular national parks are seeing record numbers.

The Colorado Tourism Office is orchestrating a [campaign to direct visitors to lesser-known corners](#), hoping to spread the impact across a wider canvas. And [talk of permits to the most-trafficked attractions](#) is gaining traction. At Hanging Lake in Glenwood Canyon, where visitation soared from 99,000 in 2014 to 150,000 last year, with peak days seeing more than 1,100 users on the steep 1.2-mile trail to the fragile travertine lake, Forest Service officials have proposed to cap visitation at 615 a day. A similar proposal is under review for [accessing Condundrum Hot Springs](#) in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

Estes Park town administrator Frank Lancaster said he understand the proposed fee increase and said previous, more modest hikes have not resulted in fewer visitors to his town, the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park.

But he said this 133 percent increase “could have big impact on park visitation and our community. We’ll be discussing it further.”

Kitty Benzar, whose Western Slope No Fee Coalition has long battled federal agencies seeking to impose and raise fees for access to public lands, said spiking entrance costs is the wrong way to mitigate crowding.

“Keeping the poorest people out is just wrong, and it’s not what the national parks were founded on. They are obviously trying to deter visitors to reduce crowding — and what are they telling us? They

don't like poor people," said Benzar, who blasted the upcoming one-month comment period as "sneaky." "Welcome to your national park: If you can't afford it, you can't come."