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The Desert Sun

Joshua Tree residents fight Trump's 'insane' national parks plan to increase fees

[Sammy Roth](#), The Desert Sun Published 10:54 p.m. PT Nov. 2, 2017 | Updated 9:23 a.m. PT Nov. 3, 2017

David Smith had a tough job Thursday night: Explaining why the Trump administration wants to make it dramatically more expensive to visit Joshua Tree, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Zion and 14 other national parks that the American people own.

Smith has worked in the National Park Service for 25 years, and he's been Joshua Tree's superintendent since 2014. It wasn't his idea to raise the park's vehicle entry fee [from \\$25 to \\$70 during the busy season](#), as President Trump's Interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, has proposed. But Smith stood before 200 people in the town of Joshua Tree, just outside the park, and did his best to answer questions about the proposal — even though he'd only heard about it 12 hours before the public was notified last week.

"The last 10 months have probably been the most chaotic 10 months of my life," Smith said. "The direction that we're getting from the administration changes day by day."

Zinke says his goal is to start [working through the National Park Service's \\$11 billion maintenance backlog](#). But the Interior Department estimates that the fees increases would boost the park service's revenue by just \$70 million per year. And President Trump has proposed slashing the park service's budget by \$400 million next year.

Asked if the administration had studied how higher prices would affect visitation, Smith said, "I just have to speak from my gut — I don't think a lot of thought went into this."

"I know (for) a lot of people, that \$25 is a major commitment to go inside the park," he said. "I see a lot of them try to turn around desperately so they don't have to spend the \$25 and they can go in somewhere in the park where there's not a fee station."

The proposed fee hike has infuriated outdoors enthusiasts and business owners in California's High Desert, where Joshua Tree offers awe-inspiring landscapes and [drove more than \\$120 million in visitor spending last year](#), according to the park service. The park drew 2.5 million visitors last year, and Smith said he expects 2.9 million in 2017.

Steve Bardwell lives in Pioneertown, a tiny High Desert community, where he rents a two-bedroom vacation home to travelers who have come to visit the national park. He showed up at Thursday's event, organized by the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association to discuss the fee increase, because he's worried about the park's future.

"The national park is a key part of the local economy, environment and the culture," Bardwell said. "It's the major driver of all of these communities along Highway 62."

Joseph Fairbanks, who lives in Joshua Tree and installs rooftop solar panels, said he sees the proposed fee increase as "a dog whistle for classism and racism," since the higher entrance fees would

disproportionately affect low-income, minority communities.

"What happens when African-American admission to the parks drops by 50 percent?" he asked. "Could this be a civil rights issue? I know it's an economic issue."

Under the Trump administration's proposal, entering Joshua Tree in a car from January through May, the park's busy season, would cost \$70 — more than the cheapest ticket to Disneyland, where a five-day pass starts at \$61 per day. Single-vehicle entrance fees during peak-visitation months would rise [from either \\$25 or \\$30 to \\$70 at 16 other parks:](#)

- Acadia (Maine)
- Arches (Utah)
- Bryce Canyon (Utah)
- Canyonlands (Utah)
- Denali (Alaska)
- Glacier (Montana)
- Grand Canyon (Arizona)
- Grand Teton (Wyoming)
- Mount Rainier (Washington)
- Olympic (Washington)
- Rocky Mountain (Colorado)
- Shenandoah (Virginia)
- Sequoia & Kings Canyon (California)
- Yellowstone (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming)
- Yosemite (California)
- Zion (Utah)

Seth Zaharias owns [Cliffhanger Guides](#), a rock-climbing guide service that operates in Joshua Tree. Before giving an impassioned speech against the proposed fee increases at Thursday's event, he urged members of the crowd to take out their phones and live-stream his remarks through Facebook on Instagram. He called on his audience to "defeat this insane initiative" by [flooding the Trump administration with public comments](#).

"We cannot segregate our national parks by finances. You, me, every single American citizen owns this land," Zaharias said. "This is the general public's easiest access to wilderness experiences. And as long as I'm alive, I am going to fight for that."

Zinke says the fee increases at some of the country's most-visited national parks "will help ensure that they are protected and preserved in perpetuity and that visitors enjoy a world-class experience that mirrors the amazing destinations they are visiting."

"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," the Interior secretary said in a statement last week.

Fairbanks is especially concerned by the Trump administration's quick timeline for considering the fee increases, and the limited ability for the public to weigh in. Last time the National Park Service increased entrance fees at some parks, in 2015, the price hikes followed a several-months-long comment process that included public meetings. At the end of that process, Joshua Tree gradually increased its car fee from \$15 to \$25.

Zinke has given the public [one month to comment on a much larger fee increase](#). The comment

deadline is Thanksgiving, Nov. 23. No public meetings are scheduled.

"This is getting to the roots of democracy," Fairbanks said.

Under Zinke's proposal, Joshua Tree's motorcycle entrance fee would rise from \$12 to \$50, and the cost of an annual pass would jump from \$40 to \$75. "[America the Beautiful](#)" passes that provide entry to more than 2,000 federal recreation sites, including Joshua Tree and other national parks, would still cost \$80 annually.

At one point Thursday night, Smith was asked if there's anything good about the Trump administration's proposal.

"I represent this administration," he responded, "so I have to say the positive things would be money going into the backlog of maintenance."

But Smith didn't linger on that point.

"I really do believe parks belong to the people," he said. "Anything that affects the public's ability to use their parks is a concern to me personally."

You can comment on the National Park Service's proposed fee increases by going to <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?documentID=83652>.