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# Trump administration proposes \$70 entrance fee for national parks

## Interior Department targets 'democratic' nature of national parks with huge fee increase.

Mark Hand Oct 25, 2017, 4:27 pm

The Trump administration's plan to impose a huge fee increase on visitors to many of the nation's most popular national parks goes against the "democratic idea" of making the parks accessible to all Americans, according to a former superintendent with the National Park Service.

The U.S. Department of the Interior, which oversees the National Park Service, announced plans Tuesday to increase entrance fees at 17 parks during their busiest five-month periods as a way to raise new revenue for infrastructure improvements. Under the [proposed fee change](#), beginning next year, entries for cars would jump from \$25 to \$70 between June 1 and October 31.

"One of the basic ideas from the very beginning was that parks would be accessible to all Americans regardless of income level," said Jim Northrup, who retired in January from his position as superintendent of the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. "When you take an entrance fee at a national park and you increase it from \$25 for a seven-day pass for a car to \$70, that is a huge increase and is going to be a real deterrent for many people to visit national parks."

Northrup, who worked at nine national parks during his 36-year career with the National Park Service, said he does not oppose entrance fees as long as they are "reasonable and supported by the public." The current fee program has helped the National Park Service to begin to address the maintenance backlog at the nation's parks. But raising the fee to \$70 at the targeted 17 national parks is too extreme, he said.

The Trump administration's proposed budget would increase funding for energy development on public lands while cutting virtually everything else, including the budget for the National Park Service. Senate Republicans passed a \$4 trillion budget blueprint last week by a narrow 51-49 vote. The bill reportedly contains procedural language that "seems sufficient to avoid a conference committee between the two chambers and allow the House to simply pass the Senate resolution," The Hill [reported](#).

Under the Trump budget plan, the National Park Service also would lose 1,242 full-time equivalent staff. The cuts would further hinder the National Park Service's ability to preserve natural resources. "The fundamental responsibility of the National Park Service is to take care of natural and cultural resources within the park," Northrup said. "It takes adequate funding to be able to take care of the parks, which are being impacted by climate change and invasive species."

Northrup was a featured speaker Wednesday at an event on Capitol Hill, organized by NDD United, to discuss the worsening austerity measures facing domestic spending. NDD United, a coalition of local, state, and national organizations, was founded in response to the Budget Control Act of 2011, which placed caps on federal spending for all non-military discretionary programs through 2021.

The plan to increase park entrance fees is attracting little support. “We should not increase fees to such a degree as to make these places — protected for all Americans to experience — unaffordable for some families to visit,” said Theresa Pierno, president and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association.

Northrup is a member of the Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks, a group of more than 1,000 current, former, and retired employees of the National Park Service. The coalition said it supports “creative means” to address the maintenance problem but that the enormous increase in fees is too much too soon.

“The enormity of the increases exceeds any increases in the history of the National Park Service,” said Maureen Finnerty, chair of the coalition’s executive council. “At a time when there is record visitation in our National Parks, there should be adequate financial support by the Administration and the Congress.”

Congress has been tightening the National Park Service’s budget for at least a decade. Annual appropriations, which make up about 88 percent of its roughly \$3 billion budget, declined 8 percent between 2005 and 2014 after adjusting for inflation, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office.

The Trump administration said the higher national park fee structure would be implemented at Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Olympic, Sequoia & Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion National Parks starting on May 1, 2018; in Acadia, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain, and Shenandoah National Parks starting on June 1, 2018; and in Joshua Tree National Park “as soon as practicable” in 2018.

A 30-day public comment period began Tuesday and will continue until November 23. A final decision by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is expected late this year or early next year.

The Shenandoah National Park has a \$90 million maintenance backlog, including needed renovations to Skyline Drive, drainage and water system, historic structures, and trails, according to Northrup. The national park has about 26 water systems — “just like any other municipality” — that provide water to visitors for drinking and other purposes, he said. The park also has four wastewater treatment plants that need upgrading.

“Because we have not made a significant investment in the infrastructure of national parks since the 1950s and early 1960s, the park service has fallen behind — as a result of inadequate funding and budget cuts — in being able to take care of these things,” he said.