

Daily Interlake (MT)

EDITORIAL: Park fee changes need to be re-thought

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It's no secret that national parks such as our own Glacier National Park have struggled for years with limited funding, increased visitation and costly infrastructure needs.

And with a \$20 trillion national debt putting a stranglehold on new spending, it's unlikely Glacier, Yellowstone and other national parks can ever expect to see generous federal expenditures sufficient to meet their maintenance needs.

That's why the proposed fee increase for park visitors doesn't shock us, but what does shock us is how little thought went into it.

Raising the weekly fee for a carload of visitors to Glacier Park from \$30 to \$70 for use during the summer months will no doubt raise more revenue from tourists, who have no choice but to pay to see the park during their once-in-a-lifetime vacation to see the Crown of the Continent, but how many local families will just decide to stay home or take a scenic drive through a free national forest instead? Most of those families don't need a seven-day pass, and they aren't going to want to pay that much for their once-a-year outing to the park.

How about a tiered entry fee? Perhaps \$30 for one day? \$40 for three days? And \$70 for seven days? That way, day-trippers would still be paying the same fee as now, and there would be more revenue as well.

Possibly out-of-state visitors won't pay for the seven-day pass either, but why should they if they don't need it? Perhaps we should do away with the seven-day pass altogether and just have a one-day and four-day pass and then go directly to the annual pass. Clearly, by pricing the annual pass just \$5 more than the seven-day pass, the Park Service is trying to push people toward the annual pass anyway.

Another possibility is coming up with a fee structure that rewards local visitors with a rebate or instant refund if they live in a contiguous county. Residents in those counties, after all, already pay a premium in the form of higher infrastructure costs from having to support the large number of visitors who pass through every year. Plus, it has been noted by park superintendents through the years that many local students have never visited Glacier Park despite living in its shadow. Whatever we can do to engage local families and their children to appreciate the natural wonder preserved here should be taken into consideration.

Perhaps the greatest missed opportunity in this proposed fee structure is that the annual America the Beautiful Pass, which allows access to all national parks and federal recreational lands, will remain at \$80 per year. If the Park Service intends to charge \$75 for an annual pass to Glacier and 16 other high-use parks, then it only makes sense to raise the all-park pass to at least \$100. Otherwise visitors will be smart enough to use their America the Beautiful Pass to avoid paying anything when they arrive at

West Glacier.

Both of Montana's senators, one a Democrat and one a Republican, are skeptical of the new fee structure, which tells us that the Park Service needs to go back to the drawing board. If you agree, we encourage you to submit your comments online at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/proposedpeakseasonfeerates>, or by mail to 1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop: 2346 Washington, D.C. 20240. The deadline is Nov. 23.