

St George News (UT)

## **Are proposed national park entrance fee increases discriminatory and against NPS values? Part 1 of 2**

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**ZION NATIONAL PARK** – There has been no shortage of stories in news outlets across the country about the Trump administration’s proposed entrance fee increase for 17 of the country’s most popular national parks. Zion, Bryce Canyon, Arches and Canyonlands in Utah number among those proposed parks, as well as others in the region, including the Grand Canyon, Grand Teton and Rocky Mountain national parks.

Numerous reports and opinion pieces say the suggested fee hike discriminates against less fortunate Americans and goes against the mission of the National Park Service. However, others applaud the increase as a necessary revenue stream to help address the reported \$11 billion maintenance backlog within sites administered by the National Park Service around the country.

The increase in fees comes despite the Trump administration’s 2018 budget proposal to cut nearly \$400 million from national parks, a recent [Washington Post story](#) reported.

However, a set of bills that make up the proposed “National Park Service Legacy Act,” which has garnered bipartisan support, would utilize federal oil and gas royalties from the national treasury – to the tune of \$12 billion – to help pay for deferred maintenance over the next 30 years. The Legacy Act is not yet law, and both Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and President Donald Trump have been mute on how they feel about the bill.

One [recent story in the Village Voice](#) reported that some watchdog groups speculate the maintenance backlog is purposely inflated to justify leasing public lands to oil and gas interests and that concessionaires who lease property from the park service should shoulder some of the maintenance tab.

The proposed rise in entrance fees – which would be in effect for the 17 parks’ busiest seasons – are substantial, more than double the current rates. For instance, the proposed fee hike for seven-day entry into Zion National Park would jump from \$30 per carload to \$70 per carload.

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Zion spokesman John Marciano said the public needs to remember the proposed fee increase and Legacy Act are not a done deal.

“Both the Legacy Act bill in Congress and the fee increases for 17 national parks are ‘proposals,’” he said. “Both are targeting ways to tackle the issue of deferred maintenance backlogs in our parks. Both are helpful.”

Some say “surge pricing” caused by the potential fee hike might naturally dissuade some visitors from coming during the peak season, thereby helping to address issues created by recent steady increases in visitation at Zion. However, in the park’s July newsletter explaining the alternatives being considered to address overcrowding, Zion officials state the park is against such pricing measures.

“National park units are a public resource, and to the extent possible, should remain affordable to

visitors across a range of financial status,” the newsletter stated. “Congestion pricing could place unfair financial burdens on some visitors, as price points during peak visitation times would likely need to be very high to maintain visitor capacity by dissuading park visitors from entering during crowded times through paying a high rate.”

In response to this discrepancy, Marciano said that the entrance fee increase proposal and the Zion Visitor Use Management Plan are “two different animals for different purposes.”

“At the Zion National Park local level, ‘surge pricing’ was dismissed as a concept for purposes of our Visitor Use Management Plan,” he said, “because we didn’t believe it would accomplish our goal of managing visitation overcrowding.”

In response to the entrance fee increases, the Zion National Park Forever Project, the park’s official nonprofit partner that leads philanthropy efforts for the park, issued a statement outlining its view of the matter and advocating a more cohesive, planned-out approach.

“Increasing the visitor entrance fee during the summer months seems to arbitrarily target lower income individuals, young people, and families with children in school that may be unable to visit during a shoulder season,” the organization’s statement reads.

We don’t believe that this is a fair way to go about it, and that further analysis should be done.

Per the statement, some level of increase to entrance fees might be prudent, “but not in the absence of a more comprehensive approach by Congress, and by our National Park Service partner.”

While the statement acknowledges that federal appropriations and visitor entrance fees support the park’s basic maintenance needs and day-to-day operations, the Zion Forever Project also said annual congressional appropriations for Zion have not kept up with park visitation.

The statement suggests three necessities to get the most out of funding and meet parks needs – suggestions the organization said it is sharing with the Interior Department and Congress.

1. A dependable annual congressional appropriation that meets the basic operational and maintenance needs of parks based on increasing park visitation.
2. More in-park flexibility for how appropriations and entrance fees can be utilized to give visitors and parks maximum benefit.
3. Empowered private philanthropy and public-private partnerships to grow a lasting community of stewardship for our parks.

Currently 80 percent of park entrance fees stay within the park where they are collected, while 20 percent goes into a fund to help parks that don’t charge entrance fees. The latter allocation is a sticking point for some, who say those sites should charge entry fees to raise more money for the parks. Additionally, as the Forever Project’s statement noted, parks also depend on annual congressional appropriations.

In contrast, Utah’s state parks are operated differently and could be a model for national parks to emulate.

Fred Hayes, director of the Utah Division of Parks and Recreation, said the state parks utilize a “pay to play” philosophy wherein the money used to operate the system is generated by users.

“We only receive a small tax appropriation, and that is dedicated to the operation of our museums and heritage sites that serve a somewhat different mission,” Hayes said. “None of the other parks receive any general tax dollars.”

Just as the state's national parks are experiencing a dramatic increase in visitation, so are the state parks, Hayes said, although they don't have the maintenance backlog of the national parks.

The state parks have been moving towards self sufficiency since 2011 and have put away some money for capital improvement, he said, but will ask for a significant appropriation during the next legislative session in order to start reinvesting in aging facilities.

"We are fortunate that our revenues are dedicated to the park system improvements," Hayes said. "That means that the money generated in the parks has to be spent in the parks."

Additionally, Utah's state parks utilize something that could be considered the opposite of "surge pricing," including lowering fees at campsites during the slower seasons to help entice potential visitors to come when the parks are not crowded. Visitors don't see that in national parks.

Unfortunately, Hayes said, the federal government doesn't have that kind of flexibility. This comes back to the Zion Forever Project's suggestions.

The jury is still out on the fee increase proposal, and Americans, many of whom would say they "own" the national parks, are welcome to comment on it.

"The public comments continue to flow in, so we'll have to wait and see what becomes of it," Marciano said. "Once decisions are made, if any, on entrance fees, all parks will be affected differently."

The general public can make their voices heard about the proposed fee increase until Nov. 23 [here](#).

In the conclusion of this series, St. George News will discuss some of the varied public viewpoints already expressed by residents both in Utah and outside of the state. While some have supported the idea, comparing the national park experience to that of an amusement park, others are speculating that if enacted, the fee increase could actually backfire on individual parks.