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Congress pushes back on Interior plan that would more than double national park fees — and hurt Utah families, Rep. Love says

Zinke says revenue is needed to reduce maintenance backlog at parks.

By Thomas Burr

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Washington • Congress is pushing back on an Interior Department proposal to more than double entrance fees at some national parks during peak times and could look at legislation to halt any increases.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke says the proposed pilot project — which would affect four of Utah's five national parks — is aimed at raising money to chip away at the estimated \$11.3 billion maintenance backlog at parks across the country.

The cost at peak times to enter Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands and Zion national parks would be \$70 a car under the proposal unveiled last month. Parks now charge between \$25 and \$30 per car, depending on the park. Capitol Reef was not part of the pilot-project blueprint.

Zinke says the new rates proposed are still affordable and only being suggested for parks with a high volume of visitors.

“The greatest bargain of the U.S. is our parks,” Zinke said in an interview. “Even at \$70 per car load — which is a multiple-day pass — it's cheaper than taking a family to a movie.”

Parks are in desperate need of maintenance work, he added, with much of that backlog in road maintenance and repairs. Utah's share of the backlog is estimated at \$278 million, including \$62 million at Zion National Park alone.

“Our parks are being loved to death,” Zinke said.

The Interior secretary noted that he'd like to work with Congress to change the fee structure to allow more money to stay in the park where the user fee is collected. By law now, 80 percent of the fee remains at the park while 20 percent goes to the entire system. About a fourth of parks charge a fee.

Zinke said he wants to see how the public reacts to the proposal — the comment period ends next week — and will reassess then.

“Ultimately, we work for the public,” he said, “so we want to work with the public and see what they think.”

Congress may step in first.

Rep. Rob Bishop, a Utah Republican and chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Interior Department, says he will hold hearings on the park-fee proposal and look at legislation to prohibit an agency from raising fees without consulting Congress.

“It is very difficult to allow an agency to raise money by itself,” Bishop said. “That's troublesome to me. Raising fees should have congressional input.”

Rep. Mia Love, R-Utah, is also pushing back, arguing that the fee increases would hurt Utah families and the Interior Department should be looking to charge international tourists more money than

Americans who own the system.

“It makes absolutely no sense,” Love said of the fee proposal. “We want to be able to enjoy the beauty of the landscape. It’s very difficult for a family to go from, at Zion, \$25 a car to \$70 or more.”

She noted the opposition isn’t partisan — Rep. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., has also blasted the proposal — and although Love supports most of Zinke’s efforts at the Interior Department, she said, “I’ve got to fight him on this.”

The Interior Department is taking public comments on the proposal through Thursday.