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## **Priced out of nature? \$70 national park fee would do little to fix disrepair**

Raising the cost of a visit to popular parks such as Mount Rainier or Olympic National Park from \$25 to \$70 per car in peak season would address less than 1 percent of total maintenance needs — and could keep some people away.

By [Lynda V. Mapes](#)

Seattle Times environment reporter

Calling a proposal to hike entrance fees to popular national parks wrongheaded and even immoral, opponents in a rally led by U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell on Monday called for a better solution to a backlog of park maintenance.

Cantwell, senior Democrat on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, was joined at a Seattle news conference by local outdoor recreation luminaries, including [climbing legend Jim Whittaker](#).

Best known as the first American to summit Mount Everest, on May 1, 1963, Whittaker, 88, also was the first full-time employee of Recreational Equipment Inc. — REI — retiring as its president and CEO after 25 years with the company.

“I’m outraged at what is going on here,” said Whittaker of the [proposed fee increase](#), which would raise the price per car from \$25 to \$70 at popular national parks during the busiest times of year, including at Mount Rainier and Olympic national parks. The purpose of the increase is to pay for a backlog of maintenance at the parks.

“We have to get people outdoors,” Whittaker said. “Let everyone go; I don’t want to walk the trails with just the 1 percenters. I want to be with everyone ... We need nature. Don’t price anyone out of the wilderness. No child left indoors!”

The Department of Interior under an [onslaught of criticism](#) has pushed back the deadline for the [public-comment period](#) — the last day is now Dec. 22. The department had previously provided only a month for public response to one of the biggest one-time entrance-fee hikes to the national parks in history. There are better ways to raise money for park maintenance, said Cantwell, who added the fee hike could dent an important economic engine in rural communities by suppressing park attendance, while not even beginning to address the [\\$12 billion national backlog problem](#).

The fee hike proposed by the Trump administration and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke would raise less than 1 percent of the deferred maintenance need while disproportionately affecting users of the nation’s most popular national parks during the peak outdoor recreation season.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration also has proposed cutting the operating budget of the National Park Service by \$200 million, Cantwell said, “adding insult to injury.”

Of Trump, she said, “He’s no Teddy Roosevelt.”

[Roosevelt was a legendary outdoorsman and friend of public lands](#), and [designated several national parks](#), including Olympic, in part to preserve the native elk that bear his name.

[Rob Smith, northwest regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association](#), argued that while the fee increase is assumed by the administration to raise \$70 million nationally a year, it could be less, because fewer people would attend the parks. Or, visitors will just buy an [\\$80 annual pass to dodge the much higher entrance fee, good for only 7 consecutive days](#).

“There are better ideas,” Smith said.

Rep. Derek Kilmer, D-Gig Harbor, said he hopes Congress will vote on a bill he has proposed that would devote a portion of mineral royalties to park maintenance, providing a long-term, dedicated fund.

“This is a bipartisan solution that gets the job done without sticking it to visitors and local communities,” Kilmer said.

The NPS Legacy Act states that excess, unobligated oil and gas revenues that would otherwise be returned to the treasury will be dedicated to the fund created for park maintenance over the course of the next 50 years using the following scale:

- \$50 million a year in fiscal years 2018-20.
- \$150 million a year in fiscal 2021-23.
- \$250 million a year in fiscal 2024-26.
- \$500 million a year in fiscal 2027-47.

Superintendents at both Mount Rainier and Olympic National Parks are each dealing with backlogs in maintenance totaling about \$150 million.

The needs are myriad, from fixing trails to water systems to campground maintenance.

At Mount Rainier, top needs include paying off the internal loan for the retrofit to Paradise Lodge; dealing with flood damage at the Carbon River Trail, rehab for the picnic area at Paradise, and fixing up Sunrise Lodge, said Randy King, superintendent at the park.

“You can’t say we’ll fix the roads, but not the trails, or we won’t have bathrooms,” King said. “These are the responsibility of the federal government within the national parks, and you need all of these things to make sure visitors have a good experience.”

King said he hopes the proposed fee increase provokes a national conversation about how to care for the parks.

“We have \$1.25 billion worth of infrastructure at this park alone that generations of Americans have invested in ... Deferred maintenance is really a reflection over time of underfunding. How do you deal with the backlog that exists today, and how do you prevent the backlog from continuing to grow over time?”

However, a \$70 per-car fee “is a barrier for some people,” King said, “and you don’t want to price people out of their parks.”

At Olympic, managers deal with a maintenance backlog totaling about \$152 million, said Sarah Creachbaum, superintendent of the park. Olympic comprises a far-flung range of assets in a variety of settings, from mountains to sea: \$1.2 billion worth in all, including 660 miles of trails, 150 miles of road, 17 public water systems and 16 wastewater systems; some 500 buildings ranging from simple sheds to administrative buildings and employee housing; 61 parking areas, 35 road bridges, 67 trail

bridges and 14 campgrounds.

Maintenance is always underway at the park, including a \$3.5 million improvement at the visitor center in Port Angeles, for everything from more energy-efficient windows to seismic and wiring upgrades.

But there is more to do.

She said the park's staff does its best to patch and fix, but some needs are much bigger: There are water plants at the park at end of their useful life, and wastewater systems at the park that were created before modern environmental permitting.

"It's time to address that," Creachbaum said.

"The American people sure love their parks, and they expect them to be well cared for. The amount of deferred maintenance speaks to the real need to bring our facilities up to standard."

Lynda V. Mapes: 206-464-2515 or [lmapes@seattletimes.com](mailto:lmapes@seattletimes.com)