

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

November 27, 2017

## **Connelly: \$70 proposed national park fee is part of 'push for privatization'**

By [Joel Connelly](#), SeattlePI

The \$70 entrance fee proposed for 17 popular national parks, including Mt. Rainier and Olympic in this state, should be viewed as an attempt to separate the American people from their country's crown jewels, according to the head of a National Park Service retirees group.

"It is a big push for privatization, for more private money going into parks, and more money to visit parks," said Maureen Finnerty, former superintendent at Olympic and Everglades National Parks. Finnerty heads the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks.

"It prices people out," she added. "Visitors to the parks are already older and whiter than the population at large. The fee will result in reduced visitation. In turn, that will cut into commerce around the parks."

Olympic National Park, for instance, generated \$400 million in economic output on the Olympic Peninsula in 2016.

The coalition consists of 1,400 members who have worked for the Park Service including former NPS directors, deputy directors, regional directors, park superintendents and even a number of present employees.

The U.S. Interior Department has extended until December 22 the deadline for citizens to comment on the proposed peak season fee hikes.

The parks impacted range from historic Yellowstone, to Alaska's Denali, home to the highest peak in North America, to the walls of Yosemite National Park, to desert rock formations of Joshua Tree National Park in California.

The stated reason is money to deal with the maintenance backlog at popular national parks.

In a letter to Interior, however, the coalition points out that there is \$2.765 billion worth of deferred maintenance at the 17 popular national parks.

The Interior Department has estimated that the fees will bring in an extra \$70 million a year. According to Finnerty, 12-13 percent of the money would be spent simply collecting the fees. Other dollars go to current park needs. The \$70 million estimate may be "greatly overstated" given potential decline in visitors, Finnerty argued.

"The only solution to the backlog is for Congress to appropriate money to fix the problem," Finnerty said. "We are not going to make any impact no matter how much we nibble around the edges.

"The total amount appropriated for national parks is 1/15 of one percent of the total federal budget."

The resistance to Interior's proposed fees is growing. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., joined by the National Parks Conservation Association staged an anti-fee event in Seattle last week.

Those wishing to comment on the proposed \$70 entrance fee should write to National Park Service, 1849 C. Street, N.W., Mail Stop 2346, Washington, D.C. 20240.