

# 100,000-plus comments received on proposed fee hike

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The National Park Service is poring over comments received on proposed peak-season fee increases.

In October, the National Park Service revealed a plan to increase the entrance fees at 17 of its most popular parks during peak visitor season. According to the National Park Service, the increased fees would generate revenue needed for improvements to the aging infrastructure, including roads, bridges, campgrounds, waterlines, bathrooms and more.

The peak season for the fee hike would be based on each park's busiest contiguous five-month period. For Shenandoah National Park, that would mean an increase in the entrance fee from June 1 through Oct. 31.

The peak season rate at each of the 17 parks would increase to \$70 per private, non-commercial vehicle, \$50 per motorcycle and \$30 per person on bike or foot.

A park-specific annual pass for any of the 17 parks would be available for \$75. The America the Beautiful Pass, which provides entrance to all federal lands, would remain \$80.

The entrance fee would not be charged to visitors under 16 or holders of senior, military, access, volunteer or Every Kid in a Park passes.

Fees also would increase for commercial tour operators. That change, which would be based on the number of passengers per tour vehicle, would go into effect in 2019.

To get a feel for the public's response to the proposal, citizens were encouraged to submit comments via an online form or by mail. The comment period was open Oct. 24 through Nov. 23 before being extended though Dec. 22.

During that period, 109,111 comments were received, with 1,004 specifically mentioning Shenandoah National Park.

The National Park Service still is sifting through the comments to get the overall opinion of the proposal, but a glance at the first 100 shows a close split of 59 against the proposal, 37 for it and four offering other suggestions such as charging non-U.S. residents a higher fee.

Many of the comments, especially those referencing Shenandoah, called the proposed fee increase "too high" and a "drastic move." Others said the fees at the 17 parks hadn't been increased for too long and a change was needed.

Some questioned if the fee increase was to make the parks only accessible for the wealthy and block out those unable to pay. Some also said while they supported a fee increase, a more reasonable increase would be a better option.

"A more reasonable fee increase from \$25 to \$40 would be doable for young professionals and still help meet some maintenance needs," one commenter suggested. "I fear you will drastically limit access to our national parks with this increase. I urge you to seek increased funding for the public lands

elsewhere rather than raise the barriers to visitation.”

Another commenter mentioned that as a native Virginian, they regularly hike the Shenandoah and recently had out-of-town family members from Michigan and Arkansas hike White Oak Canyon.

“As a family of modest means, there’s no way we’d ever be able to enjoy our beautiful state the way we have if the price of entry is increased to \$70 per car.

“Please do not lose sight of who these parks are meant for,” they added. “All Americans, not some, not those who can afford that type of entrance fee. All Americans at any time of the year.”

According to National Recreation Fee Program Manager Christine Williamson, the park is still in the process of evaluating the comments and hopes to have a decision in the coming weeks.

Meanwhile, the President Donald Trump’s budget introduced this year includes \$257 million to help address the \$11 billion National Park Service deferred maintenance backlog.

The budget also launches the Public Lands Infrastructure Fund, which would help pay for repairs and improvements in national parks, wildlife refuges and Bureau of Indian Education schools.

According to a government memo, the fund would be derived from 50 percent of incremental energy leasing receipts over 2018 budget projections not otherwise allocated for other purposes.

The budget also prioritizes land management operations of the National Park Service providing \$4 billion for land management operations of the parks, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

It’s currently unknown how any of these budget measures will affect the national parks or the proposed fee increase.