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## **Americans tell Interior to take a hike over proposed national park fee increase**

Interior Department officials are backing away from [a plan](#) to dramatically increase entrance fees at the most popular national parks after receiving more than 100,000 public comments from Americans nearly unanimously opposed to the idea.

In October, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke proposed to increase peak-season entrance fees at 17 parks from \$25 to \$70 — the largest hike since World War II. Joshua Tree National Park in California, where the peak season starts in January, would have been the first to charge the higher rate, followed by a dozen other parks where visitation peaks in May and June. The cost of riding a motorcycle into the parks would have risen to \$50, and walking or biking in would have cost \$30.

But as temperatures climb and parks prepare for another season of potentially record-breaking visitation, Interior and National Park Service officials are rethinking the plan based on public comments that inundated the NPS website over an abbreviated 30-day period.

“So the NPS would *more than double* the current entry fee for peak season,” read the first of 50,000 comments Interior provided The Washington Post. “I know if I were considering a trip to one of these parks and suddenly found that the trip would incur an exorbitant entrance fee, I would not ... *repeat not* take my family on this trip.”

“\$70 is insane!” another comment declared. “What the hell? You need to go to Congress, get them to fund NPS, and then get our president to actually sign it.”

For every comment in support (“I WHOLEHEARTEDLY APPROVE of this. It’s about time rates went up,” one submission said), there was a flurry of opposition. “This price hike is just too much,” said comment No. 11,424. “Having to pay \$70 just to get in would definitely make me consider other options for our family vacation.”

An Interior official familiar with the changes now being discussed said some type of increase remains almost certain but that the dramatic hike is being reconsidered for fear that it would cause visitation to plunge, reducing sorely needed revenue at top destinations such as Yosemite in California, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, Zion and Bryce Canyon in Utah, and Yellowstone in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

“We’re working to respond to those ... thoughtful and well-put comments,” the official said. “Our ultimate goal when it comes to entrance fees is to make sure the parks get 80 percent of that revenue ... but we also don’t want to put a burden on our visitors. We believe there is room to increase the fees and the annual passes.”

The parks with no entrance fees will remain that way, he said.

The official would not disclose the revised rate structures being considered but said the goal is a more modest adjustment to fees that haven’t increased in a decade. A 10 percent fee increase for all parks with entrance charges is on the table, as is a \$20 increase for the \$80 annual and senior lifetime passes. The agency is also debating whether to increase tour buses’ flat-rate charge, he said, or to implement a per-passenger bus fee to increase revenue.

Zinke and the Park Service's interim director continue to meet on the issue, according to the official, who only was authorized by Interior to speak anonymously.

In his October announcement, Zinke said the [fee increases](#) he was proposing would raise \$70 million to help address a nearly \$12 billion maintenance backlog with deteriorating park buildings, restrooms and roads. "Targeted fee increases at some of our most-visited parks will help ensure that they are protected and preserved in perpetuity and that visitors enjoy a world-class experience," the secretary said in a statement.

But Zinke backpedaled in congressional hearings last month, signaling a change in his position in response to questions from concerned committee members. He testified at a Senate hearing that Interior was now undecided about the rates and looking at various alternatives. At a House hearing that same week, he said the aim was to not hurt families.

[Two bills in Congress](#) have been introduced to address the maintenance backlog using royalties from federal onshore and offshore energy production.

Zinke's critics noticed a change in his tone. It "gives us hope that the administration has heard the outcry from the public and will abandon or significantly alter their proposal," said Emily Douce, director of budget and appropriations for the National Parks Conservation Association. The association's analysis of submissions during the public comment period showed 98 percent opposed the fee increase.

Rich Dolesh, a vice president for the National Recreation and Parks Association, said Monday that a survey conducted by a coalition of 55 national and local groups showed that people who were less likely to visit a park under the proposed fee hike were individuals who earned \$30,000 or less annually. According to [the survey](#) by the Outdoors Alliance for Kids, nearly 70 percent of respondents opposed or strongly opposed a rate increase, and 83 percent said it would make a park visit more difficult.

"If you don't keep the next generation of Americans connected and valuing our national parks, it would irrevocably break a bond that's been there since the parks were created," he said. "And if it's a fee increase that's a barrier, that's not right. We should be looking at better ways to get our families to access our parks."

Dolesh said increasing the price of annual and senior passes is a "tough" decision, since retired Americans often have fixed incomes. He was also skeptical of any idea to increase tour bus fees, because the buses are often filled with schoolchildren.

That was the point made in one public-comment submission: "As a current employee of the NPS and an avid visitor of NPS sites, I believe increasing the rates in the 17 parks will make the parks unaffordable for families and low-income individuals."

But Dolesh echoed several comments about charging more to visitors from Europe, Asia and other foreign countries who tour national parks. "It makes sense," he said. "Those are people who can clearly afford to pay, and other countries do this."

"Some may say an increase for those tourists coming from other countries may discourage them from visiting our parks, but I disagree — they are more than willing to pay these fees," according to comment No. 5,109. "This is evident by the sheer numbers of European and Asian tourists that flock to the parks via tour buses and package deals from excursion companies."