

National Park Officials Rethink Steep Fees While Seeking Alternatives

Dan Peltier, Skift.com, Apr 09, 2018

U.S. national parks became really popular during the past decade but you wouldn't know it from how Congress has historically treated them. Travelers have gotten used to paying higher fees for virtually every other part of their trips – why should national parks be any different?

— Dan Peltier

U.S. national parks were established to ensure visitors would always have access to the parks' beautiful landscapes and natural wonders. But a recent proposal to raise entrance fees at popular parks has drawn outrage from many visitors who argue they wouldn't be able to afford higher fees. The message was heard: Officials are reconsidering the price hikes.

[The Washington Post reported last week](#) that the [U.S. Department of the Interior](#), which oversees the [National Park Service](#), received more than 100,000 complaints about the proposed entrance fee increases during a public comments period that made officials reconsider the move.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke said in October that he originally proposed the fee hike to bring in more revenue to address the park service's [\\$12 billion, decades-long maintenance and infrastructure backlog](#).

Visitors to some 17 popular parks, such as Joshua Tree National Park in California and Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, would have seen vehicle entrance fees go from \$25 to \$70 if the increase was approved.

Motorcycle fees would have jumped to \$50, and walking or biking in would have cost \$30 per person. Such an increase would have been the largest since the 1940s.

Interior Department officials told the Washington Post that an increase is still being considered but that it likely won't be as steep as the original proposal.

Funding Boost

But more money to chip away the backlog still has to come from somewhere, and it looks like Congress has acknowledged that.

After months of turmoil, reorganization, and resignations within the National Park Service and advisory committees, there's finally some good news – the federal government increased the National Park Service's budget in the fiscal 2018 funding bill that was passed in March.

The National Park Service will get \$3.19 billion this year, a 10 percent and \$255 million increase year-over-year. Some \$175 million of that increase was allocated to address the maintenance backlog of projects at various parks and help fund new parks.

Before the new budget was passed, the National Park Service was facing cuts rather than gains during negotiations in Congress. Much of the travel industry is pleased the new funding is a boost for the parks, but some feel it's still not enough.

Congress is hoping for increased parks revenues to come in from offshore drilling, but that's not in the

parks' best interest, said Phil Francis, chair of the [Coalition to Protect America's National Parks](#), an organization that supports the National Park Service's mission and its current and retired employees.

The \$175 million increase for the backlog also isn't enough, said Francis. "The National Park Service budget in the early 1980s was one-eighth of 1 percent of the federal budget," he said. "A couple years ago it had declined to one-fifteenth of 1 percent of the federal budget."

The fact that Congress wants oil drilling revenues to go towards the backlog violates the 1978 Redwoods Act which says the National Park Service "should do nothing in derogation of park values," said Francis.

"We've heard this administration is interested in addressing the backlog, but we're not sure the proposed revenue from Congress will become available," said Francis. "The amount of money the bills will raise through the revenues may not actually accrue based on new leases of oil and natural gas. We really need a funding source that has certainty."

Francis is a former employee of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which was the most visited U.S. National Park Service site in 2017 with more than 16 million visitors. The park has an estimated \$186.6 million in deferred maintenance, according to National Park Service data.

"The Blue Ridge Parkway maintenance staff has been reduced significantly over the years," said Francis. "We had a historic preservation review that was eliminated because of budget issues. Their budget continues to be lean."

Where Should Funding Come From?

Negotiations for the federal fiscal 2019 budget are already underway, and President Donald Trump's proposed budget calls for a [Public Lands Infrastructure Fund that would generate \\$18 billion](#) towards funding maintenance backlog projects during the next decade.

The fund would also be partially generated through oil drilling revenues, and likely National Park Service employee layoffs and sell-offs of public lands part of the system.

Park managers are currently unable to control where, when or how many visitors a park has on a daily basis, said Justin Francis, founder and CEO of [Responsible Travel](#), a UK-based booking site that offers tours around the world that educate travelers about how their behavior impacts local cultures and environment.

Francis said low-cost airlines' book early and save models are a good lesson in how the parks might address raising fees to pay for maintenance. "Tickets booked in advance are cheaper, and those booked nearer to the visit are more expensive," he said. "This is good for cash flow too."

"I'd also do seasonal pricing, and park by park pricing and timed entry," said Francis. "Maybe even intra-day pricing."

Paying \$70 for a large family to visit some of the world's most iconic tourist attractions isn't that much considering the value of the experience, said Francis. "My suggestions on pricing are straight out of the tourism industry playbook," he said. "I'm sensitive to arguments about pricing out lower-income families but is this really expensive for what it is? I think not."

Taking Action

The [Asian American Hotel Owners Association](#) President and CEO, Chip Rogers, said he supports the Interior Department's decision to reconsider higher fees.

“Americans spoke, and the government seems to have gotten the message – our national parks must remain accessible and affordable for everyone,” said Rogers, in a statement.

“The Department of Interior’s initial plan to increase peak-season entry fees at some of our busiest national parks, in some cases well over 100 percent per vehicle, is untenable,” said Rogers. “It could drive down park attendance and lessen the flow of valuable tourism dollars that fuel small businesses around the parks.”

The Georgia, Louisiana, and California state legislatures recently passed resolutions that call on Congress to make the national parks maintenance backlog a priority and to find reliable and predictable revenue streams to address it.

Last year, about 331 million people visited U.S. national parks and spent more than \$18 billion in and around the parks. While more visitors likely doesn’t help protect the parks’ environments, park officials have said many parks still have room to disperse visitors to less popular parts of the parks.

Parks are struggling for money and know they can’t count on Congress to pull through for them. Higher entrance fees would turn some visitors away, and more visitors would naturally imply more maintenance and infrastructure improvements in the coming years.

The National Park Service is stuck in a hard place, and will likely take many years to figure out a funding model that’s sustainable.