WASHINGTON — A Colorado-based organization that opposes a new recreation fee created by Rep. Ralph Regula has announced it will work to defeat Regula’s bid to become the next chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee.

Over the weekend, the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition accused Regula, R-Bethlehem Township, of using strong-arm tactics to win congressional approval of the fee.

Regula is the originator of recently approved legislation that allows national parks, national forests and other federal recreational lands to charge visitors entrance fees that raise revenue for maintenance and improvements.

The fee passed as part of a $388 billion omnibus spending bill approved by Congress Nov. 20.

“He has used his expectation of receiving the appointment (as appropriations chairman) to threaten withholding of funding for other members’ districts and to push his pet projects,” a statement from the Norwood, Colo.-based group said.

Regula, one of the highest-ranking members of the appropriations committee, responded Sunday.

“That’s the biggest bunch of baloney I’ve heard yet,” he said.

The congressman also denied the group’s claim that the House Resources Committee gave a thumbs-up to the fee Sept. 22 only after Regula “reportedly (threatened) to deny future funding to other programs important to committee members.”

Regula said, “I have never made any such (threatening) statement.”

Robert Funkhouser, president of the coalition, conceded he lacks proof that Regula used intimidation.

Regula was present and made a pitch for a permanent recreation fee when the resources committee held a hearing and approved the proposal earlier this year.

“It was obvious that the congressman’s presence was, in my opinion ... meant to make sure that they wouldn’t vote against this bill,” Funkhouser said.
The no-fee group is asking its members to contact Republican House leaders and urge them to skip over Regula when they meet in early January to choose the next appropriations chief. Reps. Jerry Lewis, R-Calif., and Harold Rogers, R-Ky., also are vying for the post.

While the group claims to be a coalition, it does not make public the number or identify of individuals or organizations that are members. As a result, it is impossible to determine whom it represents or how large a following it has.

“We promise our members when they contact us and support us with money or letter writing that we won’t sell or share our mailing list with anybody,” said Kitty Benzar, who helped establish the group in 2001.

Regula expressed uncertainty about what impact the organization might have on his candidacy for appropriations chief.

“Hard to say,” he said. “I don’t know.”

The recently approved fee originated as a temporary “demonstration” fee in 1996, when Regula created it as part of his effort to catch up on overdue maintenance at national parks. At that time, Regula was chairman of an appropriations subcommittee that funded the parks.

The temporary fee has raised more than $1 billion, which has been used to build restrooms, maintain trails and add staff at parks and other public lands. Fees have averaged about $5.

Congress has periodically renewed the temporary fee. Last month, a permanent version of the fee was slipped into an appropriations bill that won approval from Congress.

The no-fee group criticized Regula for putting the fee in the “must-pass” spending bill, rather than allowing it to succeed or fail as a standalone proposal.

Regula, however, denied he put the fee in the omnibus. He said House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo, R-Calif., did so.

“It carried Pombo’s name,” according to Regula. “A chairman can do that.” Regula added that he “actually didn’t talk to him about that. I didn’t actually take the initiative to do that.”

Under the recently passed legislation, Congress has the option of canceling the fee after 10 years. Failure to pay a fee is a misdemeanor.