Protestors make presence known during meeting on recreation fees

Written by Mike Devich
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Word about a meeting taking place Aug. 15 between Kern River Valley Revitalization and the Forest Service got around, and about 20 members of the public protesting the Forest Service’s recreation fees showed up at the Kernville Chamber of Commerce building to add their comments to the record.

Only one problem – it wasn’t an official meeting.

It was a round table discussion set up between an ad hoc committee made up of members from Kern River Valley Revitalization and three officials from the Forest Service. The KRVR members wanted to discuss the local situation concerning the Forest Service’s increase in recreation fees.

Also present were Ray Thurm, president of the Kern River Valley Chamber of Commerce, and Cheryl Borthick, president of the Kernville Chamber of Commerce.

Chuck White of KRVR told the protestors that it was not an official KRVR meeting but just a discussion, and asked the attendees to remain quiet during the meeting. They did, and the meeting went off without a hitch, although the protestors’ presence was always a silent projection of the way they felt.

The Forest Service representatives (Sequoia National Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell, Kern River District Ranger Rick Larson and Deputy District Ranger Brenda Ehmann) started off by telling the KRVR committee that the proposed HIRA fees all around the lake, along the upper Kern River...
and along Lloyds Meadow Road were just that – proposed.

“There is a proposal on the table,” said Larson. “It has not been fleshed out or worked through.” Borthick, Thurm and White suggested to the Forest Service officials that they would like to see the Forest Service study the local economic impact of the service’s recent increase of HIRA recreation fees at the Auxiliary Dam area (from $5 to $10 daily) for a period of at least one year before they proceed with the other proposed HIRAs.

Thurm said, “We are asking that for a year we study the situation.” He continued, “(We’d like you to) evaluate the existing HIRAs to see what the accounting and impact is going to be with the new HIRAs on the economic community.”

Terrell seemed to indicate approval, but she also said that KRVR would “not be allowed to co-write a policy, but (their) input would be allowed.”

When asked if the committee members could see a business plan, Terrell said, “I don’t see a problem with that.”

KRVR President Joe Ciriello asked if it was known how much visitation dropped on other forests when recreation fees were increased there.

Larson said that visitor activity remained about the same.

Terrell said that in her experience with the Forest Service, HIRAs seem to be a better bet.

“(It used to be) if you stepped foot on a forest, you had to pay a fee. That was controversial.”

She said that HIRAs were invented to identify heavy-use recreation areas so that a fee didn’t have to be charged on an entire forest.

The Forest Service’s HIRA recreation fee program has come under attack from local citizens and has also been criticized in the national arena.

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Longer terms for concessionaires?

The Forest Service officials at the meeting were heard saying that longer contract terms for concessionaires, who are hired to run campgrounds for the Forest Service, are a “done deal.”

That didn’t sit well with public attendee Rick Dancing, who ran Camp Nine with the Kern River Valley Community Commonwealth until recently when the Forest Service took it over again. He said about longer contracts, “Nothing would be more detrimental to the community’s economy and quality of life.

The only way for the Forest Service to maximize public benefits is to form real partnerships with
community-based non-profits."

When asked about why the Forest Service isn't doing much at Camp Nine, Rick Larson said that they want to interest Kern County in taking it over.