So much for that 'lifetime' agreement

By Howard Troxler, Times Columnist

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This isn't the end of the world, but it irks those affected. They say a deal is a deal, even if you make it with the federal government.

Since the 1960s, the U.S. has sold passes for frequent visitors to national parks and other federal lands. The original "lifetime" deal was for free admission and a 50 percent discount on camping and related fees.

For Americans over 62 there was the "Golden Age Passport." For the disabled, the "Golden Access." For the rest of the public, the "Golden Eagle." The names have changed now, and the old cards are being phased out.

Jim and Linda Toth of St. Petersburg, like seniors across the country, took advantage. They've lived here 42 years and have camped the whole time, visiting the 48 continental states and Canada, too.

Their camper is a 25-foot "fifth wheel" that reaches over the bed of their GMC pickup. It has all the amenities, including a kitchen, fridge, microwave and satellite TV. They spend summers in it, volunteering at a U.S. Forest Service site in Colorado.

Jim plunked down his Golden Age passport, bought in 2001, on the table in front of me and pointed to a line of type below the title: "A Lifetime Admission Permit."

"Lifetime!" Jim stressed, tapping the card. "Lifetime!" He showed me a brochure saying the same thing.

But in December, the Forest Service proposed a reduction in the discount from 50 percent to 10 percent at places managed by private concessionaires, a little more than half the total number of sites.

"This is a big deal for seniors," said Toth, retired from 26 years of teaching at Pinellas Park High School. "A lot of seniors can't afford the full $22 or $16 or whatever a night to camp." For some it could mean hundreds a year.

The passes only cost $10. "But it's the idea," Toth said. "We have a contract here."

The Forest Service cites several reasons. The "very steep" 50 percent discount is too much for the private concessionaires, the agency says. There are a lot of seniors these days, with a lot more coming.

I talked with Jim Bedwell, director of recreation for the Forest Service. He pointed out there's still free admission, still a discount at sites managed directly by the government, and more benefits to come, including discounts on rentals of "day-use" facilities such as picnic grounds.

"What we're proposing," he said, "is only a small percentage of what those passes are good for."

To which Toth replies:

"Lifetime!"

I talked to Jim and Linda's daughter, Peggy Higgins of St. Petersburg, who inherited the bug and camps with her husband Kevin, a disabled Army veteran. At Yellowstone a few years ago, park officers urged them to trade in Kevin's Golden Access pass for a new one. No more "lifetime."
"It was really deceiving, to be honest with you," Higgins said. "I put my opinion on their Web site and told them exactly how I feel."

Time is running out, but the public can comment on the proposed change until Feb. 1. Online, go to regulations.gov and look for Notice ID FS-2009-0001. By mail, write to: U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carolyn Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage Resources Staff, 1400 Independence Ave. SW, Stop 1125, Washington, D.C., 20250-1125.

As I said, it's not the end of the world, but the campers think they had a deal. It's one thing for politicians to flip-flop — not Smokey Bear.