Tax cuts for the rich, higher fees at national parks for families. How is that fair?

By the Editorial Board
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For us, visiting Yosemite National Park is a day trip. We don’t have to plan the route (our cars seem to know it by heart). We don’t have stack tents, provisions and suitable clothing in a corner waiting for the big day; a picnic basket and a change of socks will do. We can get to the park, take a four-hour hike, snap some photos and be back in our living rooms in time for the 10 o’clock news.

So it’s upsetting that the Trump administration – in a plan announced last week by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke – wants to make those day trips so much more expensive. The plan would raise the carload admission price from $25 to $70. That there is no provision for those who live near the parks, and visit them most frequently, is an outrage.

Want to know what’s more outrageous? That there’s $11 billion in backlogged maintenance throughout our national parks system and our sorry federal government can’t find any other way to pay for it other than to jack up the price at the gate.

The fees wouldn’t apply to every national park or monument – only the 17 most popular. Obviously, that includes Yosemite but also Joshua Tree and Sequoia and Kings Canyon in California. The fees would apply only during the five busiest months – meaning May 1 to Sept. 30 at Yosemite and Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Those also happen to be the months that families actually have time to go.

So it’s not just anti-local, it’s also anti-family.

Some 330 million people visited our national parks last year. That’s an average of 11 visits for every 10 U.S. citizens – a strong signal that we Americans care about our national parks and want them properly cared for. It should be a national priority, not something you fund on the cheap after you’ve given all your buddies a tax break.

President Trump’s tax plan, unveiled Thursday, includes enormous tax cuts for the wealthy – folks who can afford a week at Mar-a-Lago or the Trump International in Waikiki. For those whose visit to Yosemite is a lifetime dream, paying $70 for a week in the park is no big deal. But for those who relish being able to dash up to Yosemite one or two weekends a month during the summer, we’re getting stuck. Instead of paying $100 for four summer visits, we’ll be paying $280.

But will these admission increases actually help the parks? Hardly. The plan raises only about $70 million, which is pocket lint compared with the NPS’ $11 billion to-do list. And while the administration is contemplating reaching deeper into our pockets, it’s also taking more away from the National Parks Service – cutting funding by almost $300 million according to its most recent budget.

We’re especially annoyed at those who say fee increases could provide “an added bonus” of thinning out “peak-season mobs a bit.” Many of those making up the Yosemite “mobs” live around here. And we
hope they’ll become a mob angry enough to express their displeasure.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein and others in both parties are supporting an alternative National Parks Legacy Act. It would ask mining companies now extracting minerals from our public lands – while paying virtually negligible fees – to pay into a parks restoration fund. That’s a better idea than extracting more cash from families.

The public has until Nov. 23 to comment online. We think you should.