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## **Rethinking the Discover Pass: The fairness and equity of a new system to access and fund public Lands**

Washington State takes great pride in its public lands. It hosts parks, forests, waterways and recreation areas which are managed by various state agencies. Chief among these are Washington State Parks and Recreation, Department of Natural Resources and Washington fish and Wildlife. Over the past ten years, funds allocated to public lands have dwindled. In 2011, 80% of the funding for state parks came from the Washington State general fund. With the advent of the Discovery pass, that funding source decreased to 20%<sup>1</sup>. Much of the funding for these areas currently comes from trailhead and parking lot passes, while more comes from licenses issued to hunters, fishermen, etc. Although the current system has been profitable, it is confusing for public lands users, proceeds are shared inequitably across agencies, and may provide a use barrier to those who cannot afford a pass.

In an attempt to solve this problem, The State of Washington Legislature Instructed the The William D. Ruckelhaus Center, a facilitator for collaboration, run by Washington State University and University of Washington and advised by state and local leaders, together with major stakeholders for public lands in the state of Washington. Their stated goal was to “coordinate a process to develop options and recommendations to improve consistency, equity and simplicity in recreational access fee systems while accounting for the fiscal health and

stability of public land management in the state of Washington”. The assessment took place from Aug 2016 to January 2017.<sup>2</sup>

They took over 50 interviews, conducted studies, and looked to other states’ public land fee schemes in an attempt to improve on the current system. In December of 2017, the Center issued a final report issuing recommendations to simplify the system, suggesting three options they assessed would better serve the community and the parks, and highlighting one in particular.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the three options offered as suggestion were alternate user fee schedules, they are simplifications of the current model, and they shift the allocations of funds to increase fairness among lands, or the perception of fairness, but the price for maintaining the lands is still user based.

Alternately, the Ruckelhaus Center suggests that funds could be raised by taxing WA state vehicle registration between \$7-\$14, with the remaining funding coming from the general fund. This would transfer public lands funding from a user based, system to a much broader tax on Washington residents. The latter is their recommended prescription for changing the way public lands are funded- but it reflects a large ideological shift.

The question becomes- who should pay for public lands in Washington? Should it be only those who use the lands to recreate, or should the cost be spread out more broadly, to those who live (and drive) here? In the following paragraphs, this essay will explore that question.

In the Discover Pass, Washington has public lands funding system to look back upon for some insight into a fee-based system. In 2012, Washington instituted the Discover pass to increase funding for public lands in order to maintain or increase current services. Passes have fluctuated slightly over the years; currently a Discover pass costs \$30 for one year, or \$10 for a day pass. The annual pass is offered as opt-in as part of vehicle registration, and is also available for purchase online and through parks offices. Penalty for parking in a Discover pass

designated area carries a penalty of \$99. After disappointing sales in the first year, users warmed up to the Discover pass. Jim Cahill, a Washington senior budget assistant states “[In 2017] About 700,000 annual passes and 350,000 day passes were sold... Nationwide, only California, New York and Florida’s pass systems generate more money... we’re raising the fourth-largest amount of revenue of states in the nation.”<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the burden of the cost of public lands is not borne by those who do not use them. This burden is especially relevant when one considers that many Washington residents do not have expendable income. Purchasing and owning a car in this state is already very expensive, and it is compulsory for most people who live here, as public transportation serves all the needs of relatively few (mostly urban) residents. A potential tax on vehicle registration would disproportionately affect the working poor in Washington, those who need a vehicle for transport, for whom vehicle ownership is already a large financial burden.

Although one could argue that the Discover pass is useful because it is profitable, and targets users who can afford to pay for it, there are three reasons to change to a broader tax-based structure. First, the fee is a barrier to use by low income residents, second, the fee is confusing, and third, the cost of the parks is borne in large part among its day users, while the benefits are spread across the state- even to those who do not directly use the parks.

The fee for a Discover Pass, as stated before is \$30/year, or \$10/day.<sup>4</sup> This cost is compounded when one considers the fact that over 20 different fees and permits are required to access all of WA lands<sup>4</sup>. These costs pose a financial barrier for lower income residents who may not have the extra money to spend on these passes, effectively banning them from many natural areas across the state. This barrier effectively disenfranchises part of our population, and excludes them from one of the integral benefits to living in the Northwest. If we as a community truly value our parks, and if they are part of our identity as a culture- then it behooves us to allow access to all who live here.

The second factor arguing against retaining a fee structure is that it is inherently confusing for visitors. WA parks are run by several agencies. Several interviewees of the Ruckelhaus Center Project said they place multiple passes on the dashboard when visiting a park in the hopes that one will be the right pass.

Some parks, such as ATV, snowmobiling, and hunting and fishing areas require both a parking pass and an additional payment. Even with a simplified structure, a fee structure still leaves people believing they are over-charged or double charged unfairly, while others, like cyclists and pedestrians are not charged at all.<sup>5</sup> While there is an argument to be made that non-vehicle patrons offer an advantage over one with a car; it is impossible to ignore that the use of the public land is not accurately reflected by the fee.

The third reason that moving to an exclusively tax-based public land funding model is that use of the park itself does not entirely encompass its benefits to the community. Our public lands incubate our fish, and house migratory and resident birds. They absorb our excess rain into aquifers and purify our water. Public lands and parks offer a benefit beyond visitor-ship. The land hosts school trips to educate our children, and WA holds it in perpetuity, and cares for it to benefit future generations. Even if a Washingtonian never sets foot in a park, they still benefit from its existence.

It is true, that policy makers need to think hard when considering a new tax- especially one which will disproportionately affect the more vulnerable members of our communities. The proposed vehicle registration tax to supplant the Discover pass is less than \$20, but it is a burden whose possible offset or rebate should be considered for those who truly cannot afford it. For the rest of Washington, it is a few dollars a year, that will go a long way to benefit the communities of people living here now, and the ones that will live here in the years and decades to come.

### Works Cited

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