

The Pros and Cons of Recreational Fees

Fees for certain types of recreational pursuits, beyond general state tax revenue, have been around for some time (e.g., boat and recreational vehicle fees, cross-country skiing licenses). As the state has entered a period of general fund budget deficits, the debate over new or increased public recreational fees has accelerated. This short subject touches on the major pros and cons identified in the literature on recreational fees.

Pros

Fees can allow certain recreational facilities to be self-supporting, or at least attempt to provide for adequate maintenance and operation.

If facility operation and maintenance is suffering in a given time period, fees can be raised to ensure self-sufficiency.

When the overall economy is down, leading to general revenue shortfalls and state budget deficits, fees for state services keep these programs going.

Fees can provide flexibility in the overall funding mix of state services.

Fees can allow citizens to make choices on whether they want the state service offered, or help determine how much it may be monetarily worth to them.

Fees promote equity by charging recreational users; nonusers do not have to pay as much for something they don't use.

Fees can be recreationally broad-based, or individual and specific, based on the recreational service offered.

Cons

Public land, where recreational fees take place, is owned by the public, generally purchased by general tax revenue, and is meant to be enjoyed by all, regardless of ability to pay.

General taxes purchase public recreational lands, generally pay for public employees management, so another fee/tax shouldn't be charged to enjoy their use.

Recreational fees may cause state agencies to begin to favor higher fee services, rather than more equitable, traditional low-fee services.

In the case of long-standing budget shortfalls, recreational managers may succumb to higher fee activities that change the whole nature of a recreational area (i.e., allowing golf in a wilderness park area).

Recreational user fees constitute a regressive system because as the fees become higher, the percentage of population that can afford them become lower and there are more nonusers subsidizing users.

Public recreation enables people to participate who might not do so otherwise. If recreational managers go to self-funding through fees, pricing low-income people

out of participating, the public purpose for ownership is defeated.

Recreational fees can create an incentive for a public agency to make resource decisions based on increasing the number of visitors to recreational land, not based on the carrying capacity or what is best for the land and its natural resources.

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