

Wyoming parks eye service cuts, higher fees

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CODY - As Wyoming's state budget tightens because of reduced energy revenues, residents will pay higher fees and see fewer services at state parks and historic sites, and some park concessionaires may pay more in royalties to the state.

Responding to a request from Gov. Dave Freudenthal that all state agencies cut budgets by up to 10 percent, the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources will avoid closing facilities by laying off workers and cutting services, director Milward Simpson said.

"Visitors will be paying higher fees and seeing a decline in services," Simpson told the Legislature's joint Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee, which met Monday and Tuesday in Cody.

The department will work to minimize the effects of budget cuts, but seasonal employees will work less, emptying trash bins and cutting grass less often, and some campgrounds may be converted to day-use facilities, he said.

And though legislators did not cite budget woes as a reason, some expressed frustration with a handful of concessionaires they saw as not paying a fair rate for the use of state lands, particularly in Hot Springs State Park in Thermopolis.

One attraction owner in that park said that the short tourist season and high operating expenses make it difficult to stay profitable.

Of the state's seven major state park concessions, two hotels and two hot springs bathing pools are located on state land in Thermopolis. Hot Springs State Park is Wyoming's most popular state park, with more than 1 million visitors each year.

Simpson said the agency is looking to strike a balance between charging concessionaires a fair-market rate without unduly burdening small-business owners, but added that old contracts made that difficult.

"A lot of contracts are more than 50 years old. A lease that just expired in Hot Springs State Park had my grandfather's signature on it," Simpson said of his namesake, Milward L. Simpson, who was governor from 1955 to 1959.

Simpson said that some concessionaires pay only 1 percent of gross revenues, and that auditing and inspecting the businesses has been a difficult and politically charged process, with at least one business operating month to month on an expired lease.

"Putting politics aside, we need to jack up these percentage rates to an amount that's reasonable and put extreme restrictions on them in terms of audits and inspections," he said, adding that lawmakers were likely to hear complaints from business owners.

"We're not real happy with how concessionaires are treating the state," said Rep. Allen M. Jaggi, R-Lyman.

"How come there are no consequences here for individuals? This is a crazy situation," said Rep. Bill Thompson, D-Green River, adding that parks administrators were "being hamstrung" by uncooperative vendors.

Hot Springs State Park Superintendent Kevin Skates said the park's two hotels and two bathing pools pay low concession fees to operate on "prime locations in the park" and that "we provide them with millions of gallons of mineral water at no charge."

Sen. Kit Jennings, R-Casper, said parks managers should not have "vendors kicking them around, not reporting to them, not getting audits."

"Let's make sure it's printed in bold in our next agenda that we're going to address this. Those vendors and concessionaires should expect legislation to give the department the tools and authority to get things done," Jennings said.

"I don't know what the answer is," said Sen. Kathryn Sessions, D-Laramie, adding that it was costly and risky to operate park businesses that were tied to tourist cycles.

"These people spend an incredible amount of money on structures and upkeep, and I've seen those cycles in Hot Springs State Park," she said.

Star Plunge bathing pools and waterpark had been operating on a 50-year lease and paying the state 1 percent of gross revenues each year, owner Wolfgang Luehne said Tuesday by telephone.

That lease has expired, and the business is operating month to month as it negotiates a state-proposed rate increase to 2 percent of gross revenues, Luehne said.

Concession royalties from Star Plunge are less than \$5,000 a year, and had once been as low as \$50 a month, said Luehne, who has operated the site for 33 years.

Luehne said admission fees must stay at \$10 to attract budget-minded travelers, adding that the tourist season has less than 100 days each summer when kids are out of school.

"We've slowly started fixing the place up and working on it every day, but the water is very corrosive and we have to put in new pumps and new motors. We constantly have to replace items," Luehne said.

Though concession owners were not specifically invited to the legislative committee meeting, they will probably be asked to attend one in the fall, possibly in Thermopolis, lawmakers said.

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