

Letter to Editor, The Review Mirror, Thursday, February 14, 2013

Solutions offered for Parks Canada and Rideau Canal Businesses

Parks Canada has issued yet another revision to its proposed fees for the Rideau Canal, reinforcing the impression they had given little thought to previous proposals. In their revised form the fees still represent a disproportionate increase when compared to other Parks Canada properties

Adjustments to fees are long overdue. In recent years Parks Canada has repeated the mistake of the past of postponing fee adjustments until it is in a position of "catching up". The proposal to link current and future fee adjustments at other National Historic Sites and National Parks across the country to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) makes sense. It will become routine and is based upon an acceptable rationale.

The same formula should be applied to the Rideau Canal National Historic Site. To "catch-up" the Agency could increase the fees by 10% in 2014 as has been suggested for the Trent Severn or work out a formula which captures the CPI increases since the last fee adjustment and then increase the fees regularly based upon the CPI.

However it is also time to be far more creative in approaching revenue generation. Andrew Campbell has spoken of a 30% reduction in canal traffic over the past ten years. Why not use the fee structure to attract more users? Any increase in traffic would bring an increase in revenue -- the infrastructure is in place; operating costs remain fixed.

Here are some suggestions for ways to stimulate sale of lockages. Offer an attractive discount rate for advance sale of season passes; develop a discounted shoulder season pass to encourage use in the spring and fall when the canal is under utilized and hours of operation have been shortened; have a reduced rate for a weekday pass when the canal is under utilized; hold "special discount days" in conjunction with communities like Westport and Merrickville. Use discounted passes at low traffic times to entice residents along the waterway to make more frequent use of the canal.

Any effort to encourage increased use must be combined with aggressive marketing and yet Parks Canada's investment in marketing has decreased significantly in past years. It is time to seek out partners. The business community has indicated how important the canal is to its livelihood. Parks Canada should seek the involvement of water based and land based businesses located along the canal. They have a lot to offer and a lot to gain from increased boating traffic. The municipalities situated along the waterway have also indicated that the Rideau Canal is important to them. It is in their best interest to increase tourism traffic in the area. Together the Agency, local businesses and the municipalities could pursue an active joint marketing strategy.

Increasing boating traffic -- "visitation" -- and thereby increasing revenue is far more likely to have success than turning away users through a disproportionate increase in fees. It also relates to Parks Canada's core "business" which simply stated is the protection and presentation of the national heritage. Lost in the discussion about fee increases have been the reductions in funding levied by Parks Canada for services, for personal interpretation and for cultural resource protection on the historic canals. These too have been disproportionate and threaten the Agency's capacity to perform its mandated responsibilities.

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