

Nature center deserves reprieve

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The delay proposed by Mayor Chris Beutler for imposition of an admission fee for the Pioneer Park Nature Center is sensible. The Lincoln City Council should go along.

Admission to the nature center has been free ever since a tract of land in Pioneer Park was set aside for the nature center in 1963.

Since then, the nature center has grown to 668 acres, including a swath of eastern bluegrass prairie. Eight miles of trails in the center take visitors through the prairie and wooded areas. The Chet Ager interpretive center holds exhibits and various live animals, such as snakes, owls, turtles, falcons and others. Outside there are herds of bison, elk and white-tailed deer.

Every year the center attracts about 12,000 people, including preschool groups, school children on field trips and Scouts working to get badges.

The proposed fee of \$3 to \$4 may not sound like much, but it would have a greater impact than some might imagine.

The fee would make organizing a field trip to the center more of a hassle for youth groups, since it often would entail collecting the fee from parents. The fee would discourage attendance for low-income families for whom the fee would be a significant bite from a tight budget.

As a letter to the editor pointed out, the fee also would mean that a trip to Pioneer Park no longer could include a quick peek from the car at the buffalo, elk and deer. A new gate would be installed at the entrance to the nature center preventing access.

It's not surprising that of all the park fees proposed by the Beutler administration to reduce the size of budget cuts, the proposed fees for the nature center provoked the most opposition.

The 40-plus year tradition that the nature center is open to the public free of charge should not be ended cavalierly and hastily.

Although the park department has been the target of budget cuts year after year, and fees have been jacked up regularly, it was still a surprise to many that the city's budget situation had become so dire that city officials thought they needed the estimated \$40,000 a year that would be generated with the proposed fee.

In proposing a year delay, Beutler said it would allow Friends of the Nature Center time to draw up a plan to sustain the center without fees.

That's one possibility. Another is that a delay would give city officials time to reflect on whether the fee was necessary at all. Lincoln residents often take pride that their city is a good place to raise a family. The proposed nature center fee would be a step in the wrong direction.