

On June 8, 2010, the citizens of Cape Elizabeth will be asked to vote on whether they favor the implementation of parking fees at Ft. Williams. Five members of the Council are in favor of a “pay-and-display” system; two are opposed. Below are some commonly asked questions regarding fees, along with the Council’s response.

Why do five of seven Town Council members want to impose fees for parking at the Fort?

All members of the Council want to be responsible stewards of this great asset. Five of us believe a modest fee to park is the most efficient and least intrusive solution to the growing financial needs at Ft. Williams.

The town allocates approximately \$175,000 in its annual budget to maintain Ft. Williams and an additional \$75,000 on equipment and employee salaries, bringing the town’s annual expenditure to about \$250,000. If this told the entire story on money needed for the Fort, we would not be considering parking fees. After all, this is a relatively modest amount of money when compared to the overall budget. However, according to the Director of Public Works and the Ft. Williams Advisory Commission, the needs of maintenance, repair, and replacement continue to accumulate and accelerate. These include the maintenance of the pond, trees, vegetation and invasive plant species and repair of the many structures that are deteriorating, including buildings, ruins, pathways, stairways, sports fields, fire boxes, picnic tables, stone walls, roadways, parking lots, and perimeter fencing.

In short, while the town prides itself on offering Ft. Williams as our gift to the world, we are not at present caring for this treasure. And while some tell us that they would gladly pay more in taxes to keep the Fort free, many more say that taxes are too high and we need to spend less. In an effort to balance our fiduciary obligation to the Park with reasonable taxes for our citizens, a majority of the Council believes that a pay-and-display parking system is the best approach.

Can’t we fund the capital needs and annual maintenance costs through private donations?

Based on our experiences with private donations over the past decade, the answer to this question is no. The Fort Williams Charitable Foundation funding of projects at the Fort over the past ten years totals approximately \$30,000, or an average of \$3,000 per year. In addition, donation buckets around the Fort have collected a total of about \$12,000 in ten years, or a yearly average of \$1,200. While these contributions are greatly appreciated, they don’t come close to covering the annual upkeep and maintenance of the Fort, let alone its long-term capital needs.

So what are the long-term capital needs of the Fort?

The 2003 Master Plan for Ft. Williams (available on-line at www.capeelizabeth.com/fw_masterplan.pdf) has identified a number of capital needs or areas of concern, including the Meadow and Chapel Road, Goddard Mansion, Battery Keyes, Battery Knoll, the Cliff Walk, Portland Head Light Grounds, the Green and Battery Garesche, the Pond, the Parade Grounds (including the bleachers), Officers' Row, and Battery Blair. As the Master Plan concluded, maintaining these historical structures represents a "significant challenge." Among the goals identified by the report are (1) to enhance the educational benefit of the Park's valued cultural and historical resources, (2) to review safety and accessibility; and (3) to stabilize existing structures until more extensive repair and renovations are undertaken. If we are going to be in a position to preserve the park's features for future generations, we need to start raising funds today.

How about being more creative and coming up with other ways to raise revenues from Ft. Williams?

Ice cream stands, vendor carts, function halls, cemeteries, jazz festivals, wedding rentals—the list of ways to generate revenue is long. There are indeed many creative ideas out there, and the Ft. Williams Advisory Commission is in the process of exploring their feasibility. Many citizens may not realize, however, that there are impediments to what can be done in the Fort, including shoreland zoning regulations, the absence of sewer and water lines, the designation of certain areas as "open space," and restrictions on alcohol consumption. Thus, a seemingly good idea may simply not work, or it may take several years to effectuate the changes needed to allow the new use to occur in the Fort. For the short term, the implementation of parking fees is the simplest and least intrusive way to address the revenue shortfall. That is exactly why the Fort Williams Advisory Commission recommended to the Council that a pay and display system made the most sense.

If we go with a pay and display system, how will that work? Will people have to pay to enter the Fort, including walkers and bikers?

People will still be able to enter the Fort on foot or on bicycle for free. Motorists who simply want to drive through and take a look will also enter free. The proposed \$5 charge will be for those visitors who wish to park and stay for a visit, whether to take a quick tour around the lighthouse or spend the whole day enjoying the historic sites, lawns, beach and picnic shelter.

Kiosks will be set up at the various parking areas. After parking, the driver will **pay** \$5 (in cash or with a credit card) for a parking ticket which will then be **displayed** on the dashboard (hence the phrase **pay and display**). Yearly passes can be purchased for \$20 for non-residents and \$10 for residents.

What about parents who attend their children’s little league games? What about people who are there for a special event?

Parents attending a child’s sporting event will be exempt from the parking fee. People who attend special events will either be exempt or the parking fee will be worked into the price of admission. The council and town staff will work through these scenarios to ensure that fees do not discourage attendance for special events and are fair to the users.

Where will the money from the pay and display system go?

All revenues generated at the Fort will be devoted to the Fort. Period. If we are fortunate enough to generate revenues beyond the annual needs of the Park, we will set aside the surplus for funding long-term capital needs.

My tax dollars already support the Fort. Why has a majority of the Council proposed fees for residents too?

The Council’s goal is to make the Fort financially self-sufficient, meaning no tax dollars would be earmarked for the Fort. Thus, a majority of the Council thought it would be unfair to charge nonresidents while giving local residents a free ride.

So why charge residents a lower rate for an annual pass? Isn’t that unfair too?

There are indirect costs of maintaining the Fort that our tax dollars still support (e.g., portions of employee salaries, maintenance of the roads leading to the Fort’s entrance, etc.). In addition, residents of Cape Elizabeth have historically supported the Fort through their taxes since 1964. In light of these factors, it seems appropriate to have a sliding scale for an annual pass.

What about the tour buses?

Curiously, many people in town oppose fees for individuals and families, yet strenuously complain that tour buses are making money off of the Fort and should be charged. Of course, now that the Town Council has already approved fees for tour buses, those companies will undoubtedly pass along those charges to their customers, which means that individuals who happen to be sitting on a bus will be paying a fee (albeit indirectly) to enter the Fort, while people who drive in their own car will not.

This begs the question – if townspeople are willing to charge passengers on a bus to enter the Fort, why not passengers who happen to be sitting in a car? Indeed, there may be a stronger argument not to charge tour bus companies, since their passengers are the biggest customers of the gift shop. Net revenues from the gift shop total around \$50,000, and most of these are generated from people who enter the Fort on a bus.

In the view of a majority of the Council, the fairer approach is to charge everyone who enters and parks at the Fort.

If we implement a pay-and-display system, will it make the Fort self-sufficient? Won't the cost of added staff members and equipment make this a zero sum game?

According to projections, net revenues would total \$1,265,000 after the first three years. This takes into account the initial start-up costs and ongoing labor. Thus, the fees would cover the annual cost of maintaining the Fort plus a surplus to begin addressing the numerous capital projects identified in the Ft. Williams Master Plan.

Don't we have a responsibility to keep the Fort free for all users?

Entering the Park on a beautiful sunny day is a sight to behold. On a recent spring afternoon, it teemed with activity: families picnicking, ultimate Frisbee games, tourists strolling around the Portland Head Light, youngsters throwing around a baseball. Keeping the Fort accessible to families, tourists, residents, strollers, elderly, nature enthusiasts, fishermen and photographers is our goal.

If we were already taking care of the park's needs, we would not be asking you to vote on this issue again. We do not believe it unreasonable or even selfish to ask people who use this wonderful place to help pay for it. Compared to user fees in most towns and cities across the country, this proposed fee is modest. We are used to paying annual fees to enter our state parks, a daily fee to enter Crescent or Scarborough Beach, or \$1 to park on the streets of Portland.

People object to paying fees the most when they're not used to them. If we see park attendance falling off, or if we start hearing from families or social service agencies that we are making the park inaccessible for some, we can always revisit the amount we charge, waive the fees on occasion, or even ask local businesses to sponsor a "free day" for Maine residents. We will be humane and compassionate in how we implement this system. In our view, we have a responsibility to make the Park accessible for all users. While we realize that some people may not be able to afford any fee, we believe there are ways to accommodate their desire to use this wonderful asset.

While some say a parking fee will "destroy" the Fort, we believe that a failure to implement a fee system will contribute to the further deterioration of this wonderful place. In short, a modest fee system is the most responsible and least intrusive way for us to take care of the Fort's needs for generations to come.

If the majority of the Council favors the pay and display system, why a public referendum?

The Council has already voted in favor of a pay-and-display system at the Fort by a vote of 5-2. However, the Council also agreed that until we hear from citizens, we will not move forward with the implementation of parking fees. The reason for this is simple. In 2006, the Council posed the same question to Cape's citizens and a majority voted no. Since that time, many have asked us to revisit this issue, and while we have the authority to enact the change without a vote,

we felt it was only fair to ask the citizens to weigh in again. We realize that there are those who passionately disagree with the pay-display solution to our fundraising needs and others who strongly agree. The only way to know how the majority of the citizens truly feel is to put it out to vote.

If you would like to comment, please send the Council an e-mail by visiting www.capeelizabeth.com, click on “Contact Us” on the left side of the home page, and then click on “E-mail all Town Councilors.”

Thank you for your interest in this issue.