

State Pushes Out Local Vendors – State Gets Piece of the Action

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The governor's obsession with money at all costs has trickled down to the ground floor – now he is taking a cut from local kayak and tube rentals in the Columbia County area.

Wanting to exploit the preserved areas of our state parks was

bad enough, but this is a new low even for our crass, commercially crazed leader(lack of)ship in Tallahassee.

Cindy Swirko writes about this crazyiness in the [Gainesville Sun](#), seen here at this [link](#).

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

Tube vendors worry changes could ding business

By [Cindy Swirko](#)

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For 46 years, Linda Soride has rented inner tubes and floats to people for a lazy trip down the chilly Ichetucknee River.

Now she's afraid her business will be jeopardized because of changes regarding tube rentals and fees at Ichetucknee Springs State Park by the company that runs park concessions.

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And, Soride said, the higher prices may reduce the number of park visitors.

"It's kind of a mess. People are getting really aggravated," Soride said. "I've had so many customers and my regulars ... are mad and say they won't come anymore."

Statistics provided to The Sun by the park service show attendance starting the Memorial Day weekend has declined the past three years.

Last year, Cape Leisure Corp. of Brevard County was given the concession contract by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which includes the Florida Park Service.

The 10-year contract with Cape Leisure, which has concessions in several other state parks, was to handle food and drinks and to expand the operation to include merchandise sales, shuttle and tram services for tubers, and kayak, canoe, paddleboard and bicycle rentals. DEP receives 10 percent of gross sales.

Tube rentals in the park by Cape Leisure were not allowed in the initial agreement. They were to remain the business of vendors on U.S. 27 from Fort White to near the park's south entrance and Elim Church Road, or Columbia County Road 238, at the north entrance.

Under previous agreements that still stand, those vendors are able to get into the park to retrieve their tubes.

But the park service changed the contract to allow Cape Leisure, which bought a vendor operating outside the park, to rent tubes inside.

The change will ease traffic concerns on U.S. 27 and Elim Church Road and is something park visitors had been suggesting, said Clifton Maxwell, park service regional bureau chief.

"We will continue to allow people to bring in tubes from outside. We have been very careful about not doing harm to our longtime partners," Maxwell said of the outside vendors. "This certainly is a different business model for the area and it can have some impacts."

But Fort White businesses and groups that try to protect the Ichetucknee and the Santa Fe River, into which the Ichetucknee flows, say the move is undercutting the local economy that gets

a boost from tourism.



Merrillee Malwitz-
Jipson

“It’s almost like the ghosting of Fort White,” said Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson of the group, Our Santa Fe River. “They take away their tubing – like really, is the state not really fully aware of what they are doing to this small, rural town that got its place with the rivers and springs and recreational tourism business?”

Among the tube rentals that had been operating at three locations outside the park was Lowe’s Tubeland. But Lowe’s owner Linda Lynch sold the business to Cape Leisure and it got approval to rent tubes in the park.

Lowe’s Tubeland is still open outside the park, but customers get wristbands that enable them to get tubes and shuttles in the park.

Lynch said her father began renting tubes outside his house on Elim Church Road in the 1940s. With her children working in different careers, Lynch decided to sell.

“I did it mainly for personal reasons. My dad is 77 years old and it’s just me doing it now. I didn’t do it to hurt anybody,” Lynch said. “I think it’s working out really well.”

People have been tubing on the Ichetucknee for decades. Once a local favorite, it got so popular that the headspring and its six-mile run to the Santa Fe River became seriously damaged. The aquatic grasses that are crucial to fish and other aquatic animals were nonexistent in some parts of the river.

In 1970, the state bought 2,240 acres of land between U.S. 27 and CR 238, including the headspring and a 3.2-mile length of the river. Since then, daily limits have been placed on the number of people who tube from the north entrance by the headspring. That and other measures have helped restore some of the natural system.

That user limit – 750 a day – is what Soride fears may eventually hurt her business.

As people rush to the park to get in under the limit, she said, they may not spend the time to stop at outside vendors for their floats. Instead, they may want to save time by renting inside the park.

Some fees in the park also have increased.

Previously, tubers paid a park entrance fee of \$4 per person, which covered the cost of a tram to the midpoint launch site. That has been changed to \$4 for cars with one person and \$6 for cars with with two to eight people.

However, Cape Leisure charges \$5 plus tax per person for tram service and \$7 plus tax for a shuttle to the northern entrance.

Maxwell said he believes the lower entrance fees may increase the number of visitors, which could help tube vendors outside the park.

Also, the park is going to try to boost attendance in the shoulder season – the months before Memorial Day and after Labor

Day – when air temperatures are fairly warm.

“I think we are going to have an uptick in September and October ... and see more attendance early in the season,” Maxwell said. He added that tube rentals in the park and the other changes were made with “a lot of input from park users and this is something they’d like to see.”

Attendance has been declining at the park starting from the Memorial Day weekend through June – 57,583 visitors in 2015, 48,835 in 2016 and 38,691 visitors this year. DEP said the decline this year could be due to June’s heavy rains.

But annual attendance for an entire year has been up and down. It increased in the 2015-16 fiscal year from the previous year but declined for the 2016-17 fiscal year. The fiscal year ends June 30.

Soride believes part of the decline may be due to the changes. In the past, she said, a driver would drop off passengers at the north entrance, drive to the south entrance and take the shuttle included in the entrance fee.

Now, the website for Lowe’s Tubeland suggests visitors park at the south entrance and take the shuttle to the northern entrance. That is a cost of \$7 plus tax for each visitor over the age of 5.

“So you are paying \$7.50 each for a shuttle pass and you are paying for tubes they have in the park, instead of just going to the north end, dropping people off and having one person go down. If you want to start at the mid-point, you pay \$5.35 to ride the shuttle,” Soride said. “There are families that can’t afford it. This is going to hurt families. I’ve had four generations of families who may have 10 people in the family. They can’t afford \$7.50 each if they want to go to the north

end.”