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ART & DESIGN

Met Changes 50-Year Admissions Policy: Non-New Yorkers Must Pay

By ROBIN POGREBIN JAN. 4, 2018

For the first time in half a century, visitors to the world's largest cultural institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, will have to pay a mandatory admission fee of \$25 if they do not live in New York State under a new policy that begins March 1, the museum announced on Thursday.

The change reflects the Met's efforts to establish a reliable, annual revenue stream after a period of financial turbulence and leadership turmoil, particularly given what the Met describes as a sharp decline in people willing to pay the current "suggested" admission price, also \$25. But the move could provoke objections from suburbanites and tourists as well as outcry from those who believe a taxpayer funded institution should be free to the public.

[Our chief art critics call the new policy a mistake]

"What we're trying to do is find the right balance in generating revenue to support this enterprise and admissions income has fallen behind," Daniel Weiss, the Met's president and chief executive officer, said in an interview. "Everybody who

benefits from this institution is being asked to contribute to its well-being because we are fundamentally a community resource.”

The Met’s pay-as-you-wish tradition will continue for state residents, but they will be required, for the first time, to show address identification; those without it will be asked to bring it next time (but not turned away). There will be no separate check-in desk or screening process for non-New Yorkers. “We can always make the rules more strict,” Mr. Weiss said, “but I’m hoping we don’t have to.”

The required fee was borne of economic necessity, Mr. Weiss said, and is related to a planned decline to New York City funds to the institution.

Over the last 13 years, even as attendance has soared from 4.7 million visitors to 7 million, the Met has seen a steep decline in the proportion of visitors who pay the full suggested amount, from 63 percent to 17 percent.

Met admission fees provide 14 percent of its \$305 million operating budget, or \$43 million, which Mr. Weiss said puts the Met at the low end among its peers. That figure is expected to increase to 16 or 17 percent — or \$49 million — with the policy change.

“We’re the only major art museum in the world that has recourse neither to mandatory admissions or significant government funding,” he said, pointing out that both the Smithsonian in Washington and the Louvre in Paris receive significant public support. In New York, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim already charge \$25 — though, unlike the Met, they are not in city-owned buildings nor supported by taxpayer dollars.

The existing pay-as-you-wish policy will also continue for students from Connecticut and New Jersey, and full-priced admission tickets will be honored for three consecutive days at the Met’s three locations: [SEE MY OPTIONS](#) [Met Breuer](#) [Subscriber login](#) and the Cloisters.

The fixed admissions charge is not just a short-term shot in the arm, nor will it alone be sufficient to reverse the Met’s recent financial challenges, Mr. Weiss said. The change is intended to give the museum a predictable source of revenue at a time

when institutions all over the country face competition for private donations and patrons' leisure time; declining membership; and dwindling public dollars.

The new policy was approved by the city, which owns the museum's building. "Having a healthy Met is extremely important to New York City," said Tom Finkelpearl, the city's commissioner of cultural affairs. "The basic motivation was to help the Met balance its budget in a way that did not hurt New Yorkers."

The Met currently receives about \$26 million from the city. Under the new admissions policy, the \$15 million that goes toward energy costs like heat and light will remain intact; the remaining \$11 million which offsets the Met's operating costs (for security and building staff) will reduce on a sliding scale after the first full year, depending on how much incremental revenue the new admissions policy generates, with a cap at \$3 million.

The Met's reduced portion of city funds will be redirected toward cultural institutions in underserved parts of the city, Mr. Finkelpearl said.

Fred Dixon, the chief executive of New York's tourism agency, NYC & Company, said he did not believe the new policy would affect the flow of visitors to the city.

"Most folks expect to pay when they attend an attraction or museum," he said. "When you look at the landscape of attraction pricing, the Met is an incredible value at \$25."

The admissions policy shift represents one of the ways in which the Met has been working to address a budget deficit that two years ago threatened to balloon to \$40 million. While the museum now has a deficit of about \$10 million, Mr. Weiss said it aims to balance its budget by 2020.

The Met is also seeking to shore up revenue from other sources, including membership and restaurants, both of which are under review, and retail operations, which have already undergone an overhaul and are now profitable. "Our job is to get all of those to function in balance without in any way undermining our mission," Mr. Weiss said.

The Met is also reviewing the possible sale of its executive apartment on Fifth Avenue; the previous director, Thomas P. Campbell, moved out this week. Mr. Weiss said the department heads are also continually evaluating their holdings for possible deaccession for works that will not be displayed or have a distinct scholarly value but that the Met's acquisition spending would remain steady at about \$50 million (most of the museum's acquisitions come through gifts).

Though the required admission for out-of-towners will result in a relatively modest revenue increase, Mr. Weiss said, "If every part operates a little bit better, we can get where we need to go."

Mr. Weiss emphasized that this change was not undertaken lightly and that the Met had evaluated several possible options, including mandatory admissions for everyone at a lower price point ("We felt an obligation to New Yorkers to not do that") and charging for special exhibitions ("that would undermine access for New Yorkers").

If the museum did charge for special exhibitions, that might have forced the Met to chase revenue-producing exhibitions, something it wanted to avoid, Mr. Weiss said.

On the cost side, the Met continues to look for savings, having already reduced staff and lowered the number of exhibitions annually from about 60 to 45.

Though the museum has tabled the planned transformation of its southwest wing dedicated to Modern and contemporary art — which Mr. Weiss said would have cost more than the previously projected \$600 million — the Met is moving forward with a more modest renovation with the same architectural team, David Chipperfield and Beyer Blinder Belle. Mr. Weiss said it would cost more than \$150 million less, but "there will be no compromise in quality."

"We have the vision that drove the project in the first place," he added, "but we're looking at a project that is much more cost effective and compelling."

Meanwhile, the Met has been making a concerted effort to improve internal communication and foster a working climate of transparency, Mr. Weiss said. He is

reviewing spending with department heads on a regular basis, for example, and has created an ad hoc group of curators and conservators selected by their peers that “has access to everything related to the museum’s financial management.”

“There is no question that what we went through over the last couple of years heightened our awareness of getting things right,” Mr. Weiss added.

Still unresolved is the question of what to do about the Breuer building after the Met’s eight-year lease is up. “We’re very pleased with the programming, but it’s been more demanding a process and budget than we anticipated,” Mr. Weiss said. “We’re thinking very carefully about the Breuer long term.”

The Met’s search for a director is expected to conclude by the end of the fiscal year in June, said Mr. Weiss, who added that he is not a candidate for that job. Though the new director will report to Mr. Weiss under a recent leadership restructuring, he said he is confident that the Met is attracting top candidates, including women. “It’s the best museum leadership job in the world,” he said.

Asked to define the division of labor between himself and the next director, Mr. Weiss said: “It’s a partnership where the primary sphere of responsibility for the director is the content-related work — exhibitions, curators — including external relations and fund-raising. This person will be more visible than I will be.”
