

New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art considers mandatory admission charge for out-of-state visitors

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New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of the largest and wealthiest—and most visited—museums in the world, is considering a significant change in its admission policies that would for the first time in its history require some visitors to pay a fixed entrance fee. Current admission to the museum is \$25 for adults, \$17 for those over the age of 65 and \$12 for students, but since it is only suggested, visitors can pay as little as one dollar, or even one penny.

The proposal being discussed by the museum's board of trustees and the administration of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio would maintain the suggested fee for city residents, but would make payment mandatory for out-of-city or out-of-state visitors.

The projected change in admission policy reflects in its own way the rampant and record social inequality that grows with each passing year in the capital of high finance.

The museum first opened in 1872, and 1893 state legislation codified free admission, based on the museum's status as a state-supported institution. This was modified through agreement between the city and the museum beginning in 1971. Even though the 1893 law remains on the books, it has been interpreted to allow for "suggested" or "recommended" admission.

The term "recommended" was used in recent decades. A lawsuit several years ago, however, led to an agreement to use "suggested" and to make it clearer to visitors—many of whom are making their first visit to New York and may feel pressured to pay the full amount—that it is not obligatory. If the museum goes ahead with the plans for mandatory admission, it may be necessary to amend the 125-year-old legislation.

The city owns the building, but the Metropolitan Museum itself is owned by a private corporation composed of about 1,000 prominent individuals primarily from the corporate and cultural sectors. A 41-member board of trustees is elected from this larger group.

The Met remains a tax-supported institution, most recently receiving about \$26 million in city funds, approximately 8 percent of its more than \$300 million annual expenses. Currently admission fees contribute 13 percent to the museum's annual budget, and the shortfall, after city aid and other revenues, is made up by income from the institution's massive \$2.5 billion endowment. The museum is currently running an annual deficit of some \$15 million, and in recent years there have been several rounds of layoffs as well as other cutbacks, including a reduction in the number of annual exhibitions from 60 to 40 in the current year.

Many questions remain, and there are numerous potential obstacles along the path envisioned by the museum's trustees. Among the complications is whether to exempt people who work in the city but live outside the city limits from the admission charge. There is also the issue of whether to include only residents of the city (8.5 million), New York State as a whole (19.8 million) or the massive metropolitan tri-state area (20.2 million) in the category of those who continue to enjoy discretionary admission fees.

In a city that is home, at last count, to 79 billionaires, the current arts budget of \$181.2 million is less than measly. It amounts to only about two-tenths of one percent of the city's projected \$84 billion budget for the next fiscal year. The resources clearly exist, not only to maintain the current admission policy at the

Metropolitan Museum, but to institute completely free admission for visitors from all over the world.

These resources can only be made available, however, by challenging the grip of the grasping and parasitic ruling elite that dictates accessibility to culture alongside its hold on all other significant spheres of life in the metropolis.

Democrat de Blasio, although elected on the promise to end New York as “a tale of two cities,” now embraces and personifies this description. The museum issue gave him an opportunity to put on his “populist” hat for a short time. The mayor told a news conference earlier this week, “I’m a big fan of Russian oligarchs paying more to get into the Met.”

This comment, as stupid as it is demagogic, simply (and deliberately) ignores the fact that among the Met’s annual 6.7 million visitors, more than 4 million are from outside the state. The great majority of these are not only *not* oligarchs, but in most cases are from families that have scrimped for a visit to the city and can ill afford another \$100 for a family of four to see the priceless art that should be the property of humanity as a whole.

Mandatory admission charges, in addition to causing hardship and discouraging visits from those outside New York City or New York State, must also be seen as setting the precedent for doing away with the “suggested” admission category altogether in the not-too-distant future, with the excuse of meeting mounting deficits.

As far as the movers and shakers who run the Metropolitan Museum, it is quite likely that these very wealthy and privileged individuals live in such a bubble that they cannot understand why \$25 or even \$100 is a big deal. They pay far more than \$100 for a single meal at the city’s pricier establishments.

It may also be that the Met executives, while they covet higher attendance figures, visualize the numbers coming increasingly from the city’s wealthy and gentrified neighborhoods, alongside well-heeled tourists who are already spending thousands of dollars on their visits to New York, rather than from broader layers of the population.

Recent figures for the annual compensation of top Met executives point to the material source of such an outlook. Thomas Campbell, who was forced out earlier this year as museum director, effective in June, after

serving in the post since 2009, received total compensation in 2015 of \$1.4 million. Met president Daniel Weiss, who will also serve as interim director until a permanent replacement is found, received a \$300,000 bonus for less than six months’ work in 2015. His total compensation for the half-year came to \$818,112, including a luxury Park Avenue apartment. Suzanne Brenner, a senior vice president at the museum and chief investment officer, received \$1.6 million, including a bonus of \$624,000. These figures, for only a few of the highly paid officers, should be kept in mind when considering the museum’s deficit of \$15 million.

The Metropolitan Museum’s deficits and its efforts to make its visitors pay up calls to mind the financial difficulties facing New York City’s “other Met,” the Metropolitan Opera. That august and world famous musical institution, also tracing its beginnings to the last few decades of the 19th century, has a similar-sized budget and a similar-sized deficit. It can be expected to attempt to close this gap through a combination of higher ticket prices and renewed demands for givebacks from its highly skilled employees.



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