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We're driving off a cliff with ADOT

By Mike Branom
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Arizona's budget crisis is requiring all state agencies to give until it hurts, and then give some more.

Last week is when the Arizona Department of Transportation cried for mercy - and attention.

A not-so-quick explanation: The occasion was the loss of \$110 million used to pay contractors. The money comes in the form of a short-term loan from the state, which ADOT borrows while awaiting reimbursement from the federal government.

Back in October, the state treasurer's office told ADOT and the Napolitano administration the loans would be called in if the budget woes got worse. Of course, they got worse, so last month Treasurer Dean Martin again warned the administration (by now, Jan Brewer and company) the money was soon to be taken - unless someone did something.

But no one did anything. An ADOT spokesman told me the matter was out of its hands; one of the solutions proposed would have required the Legislature to pass a bill. (Bitter laugh goes here.)

In recent months, as the state flails about for answers, ADOT has lost more than \$400 million in funding. That's why the agency put out a release last Thursday detailing its plight, down to a plea to think of the contractors' families. Soon afterward, the Arizona chapter of Associated General Contractors, which represents the companies to be affected, vented its own anger.

An interesting tack they took was complaining of a one-two combination punch. First, ADOT gets its revenues through a state gas tax - and with people are driving less, there's less revenue. Then, the state takes chunks of what little money comes in.

Honestly, I don't know what to tell ADOT and its contractors. It's easy to see why they're frustrated, but difficult to even envision a solution. Until the state's economy turns around or lawmakers find a goose laying golden eggs, we're driving off a cliff together.

Metro chief to leave

Rick Simonetta, chief executive officer of Metro, will be leaving his position at year's end.

Despite headlines to the contrary, this development is not news, a member of Metro's board of directors told me. In fact, Simonetta's departure literally was written into his employment contract, which went into effect on Jan. 1: "During calendar year 2009 only, (Simonetta) agrees to remain in the exclusive employ of (Metro) ... Thereafter, beginning on January 1, 2010 and continuing through July 1, 2010 (Simonetta) will remain in the service in an advisory capacity only. ..."

According to an e-mail Simonetta sent to Phoenix Vice Mayor Tim Simplot, chairman of Metro's board, he had been the recipient of "support and encouragement" to continue as CEO beyond 2009. But he's sticking to his plans and will leave after six years at his post.

"I want to thank you and the entire (board) for the opportunity to lead Metro through the design, construction and operational start-up of the 20-mile Central Phoenix/East Valley light rail line," Simonetta told Simplot. "After the first 3-1/2 months, it appears to be the most successful light rail start-up in U.S. transit history."


Metro was delivered on time and under budget, and now carries passengers in counts far exceeding initial goals.

As a legacy goes, Simonetta could head down the tracks with far worse.

Trains and buses

Speaking of trains, here's something handy provided me by the folks at Metro: a map of light-rail stations and connecting bus routes. It can be found at http://www.valleymetro.org/bus_schedules/bus_routes/PDF/METROLR.pdf.



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