

How cuts to ADOT will hurt

10 comments by Casey Newton and Sean Holstege
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Deep cuts will lead the Arizona Department of Transportation to close 12 Motor Vehicle Division offices and 13 highway rest stops and will delay \$370 million in construction projects.

ADOT on Thursday released its plan to close up a \$40 million budget shortfall that resulted from cuts by the Legislature and drops in gasoline-tax and vehicle-registration revenue.

The announcement comes on the heels of a \$60 million budget deficit for the fiscal year that ended June 30.

Motorists will notice closed rest stops, dirty highways and longer waits for license or registration renewals. They also can expect to wait longer for some highway improvements.

Valley residents will be spared the brunt of the cuts' impact, largely because they voted for a half-percent sales tax in 2004 that pays for most of the construction and much of the upkeep on the region's highways. Statewide, projects paid for by ADOT's \$350

million allotment of federal stimulus money will be unaffected.

"The majority of these cuts will impact the counties other than Maricopa," said.

Nonetheless, ADOT Director John Halikowski painted a grim picture in an online message to the public.

"Simply put: ADOT is running out of money because people are buying less fuel and vehicles, while the state is using transportation dollars for other uses," he wrote, noting that the Legislature swept up \$533 million of transportation funds to help close the state's overall deficit in the past two fiscal years.

describes the cuts as the deepest in the agency's history.

Halikowski predicted worse to come.

He said if trends continue, Arizona no longer will be able to match for highway construction, losing millions of dollars in aid.

Arizona builds and maintains highways using a combination of federal and state gas taxes and local , and the state depends heavily on that federal share.

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However, the federal highway fund is in dire straits of its own. Congress failed to renew the six-year federal transportation bill but passed an extension. When it runs out at the end of the month, the federal highway fund will be broke.

With Arizona's current \$1.5 billion deficit estimated to double next year, the state's residents are learning an old lesson from other states that saw their highway funding gutted. Locals stopped relying on the federal or state governments to build highway projects, instead relying on local measures such as sales taxes.

To get through this year, ADOT wants to push back highway projects, mostly in more rural areas, that would cost \$370 million over four years. ADOT's statewide five-year construction plan is \$6.4 billion, of which \$1.6 billion was earmarked for the current fiscal year. ADOT's operation budget is projected to be \$320 million, of which \$94 million is slated for maintenance.

Since February 2008, the department has reduced its staff by 450 people, or 10 percent. Officials expect more layoffs will be necessary but did not provide details Thursday.

The closure of 12 MVD offices represents about 20 percent of the 61 locations throughout Arizona.

MVD offices are unlikely to close before the end of the year, spokeswoman Cydney DeModica said. The decision requires the approval of the U.S. Department of Justice, which oversees the offices because residents may register to vote there. Officials will consider usage and distance from other offices when deciding which offices to close, DeModica said.

The MVD has submitted materials to the Justice Department, but a response is not expected for two to three months. Meanwhile, the four MVD locations open on Saturdays will switch to Monday through Friday on Nov. 1.

In the wake of the closures, MVD will heavily promote its Web site, servicearizona.com, where many basic license and registration services can be obtained.

"We're offering the same services in a slightly different way," DeModica said.

The temporary closure of 13 rest stops will leave the state with only five, with just two on Interstate 10 between California and New Mexico. The department did not provide

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details Thursday about how much it would save.

The announcement has drawn concern from truck drivers, who are required by state and federal laws to rest after 11 hours of driving.

"If there's no rest area, they'll be pulling over onto the roadside, or off-ramps, or wherever they can find to park," said Karen Rasmussen, president and CEO of the Arizona Trucking Association.

The group is working with ADOT and the Department of Public Safety to find alternate accommodations for truckers, particularly on the state's two major freight routes: I-10 and Interstate 40.

"We want to come up with alternatives that won't compromise safety," Rasmussen said.

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