

News

ADOT closes rest areas around the state

By *John Gutekunst*

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In order to meet a budget shortfall, the Arizona Department of Transportation has begun closing rest areas on the state's highways as well as some customer service offices. A total of 13 rest areas have been closed, including two in La Paz County: the Ehrenberg and Bouse Wash rest areas on Interstate 10.

While the rest areas have been closed, services are available to travelers in the community of Ehrenberg, the Town of Quartzsite, and at the interchange with Vicksburg Road.

ADOT is also planning to close 12 Motor Vehicle Division offices. When asked if the Parker office could be closed, Lucy Shipp, public involvement officer for ADOT's Yuma region, said they had not seen a final list of offices that will be closed. An ADOT press release dated Oct. 8 stated a facilities review is under way. The release stated proximity to other MVD offices or third-party outlets will be used to help identify offices for closure.

ADOT will continue to provide online services at www.ServiceArizona.com and through 140 third-party vendors statewide. To find a third-party office, go to www.az-mvd.com.

The rest area and MVD office closures are part of the department's plan to reduce its use of highway funds by 25 percent. In addition to the closures, the department is deferring \$370 million in highway construction projects, deferring maintenance activities, consolidating customer services and reducing staff by 10 percent.

"More than \$500 million in transportation funding has been diverted in the past year to address the state's budget problems," ADOT Director John Halikowski said in a press release. "ADOT's customers pay their own way by using transportation services, but, because the state is using transportation funds to pay for other needs and people are buying less fuel and fewer vehicles, we are simply running out of money."

Shipp said the recession has had an effect on the department.

"People aren't driving as much, so they buy less gas and that means lower tax revenue," she said. "It's a bad time all around."

Arizona received \$350 million from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act for highway projects in 2009. Among the projects funded were the new passing lanes on State Route 95 south of the junction with SR 72 in La Paz County. However, according to Halikowski, an estimated \$370 million in state funds will be cut over the next four years.

Federal funds allocated to Arizona for highway projects can only be used for that purpose. They cannot be used for general operations. Further, if matching state funds are not available, Halikowski said the state might not be eligible for much of these federal funds.

"Arizona risks losing its share of federal funds, meaning gas taxes paid by Arizonans would fund improvements in other states," Halikowski said.

In a press release, the department said highway maintenance activities would focus on safety issues, like emergency response, snow and ice removal and emergency repairs. Other maintenance activities, such as landscaping and graffiti removal would be limited or not done at all. Maintenance at the state run Grand Canyon Airport will be limited to focus on airfield safety.

Halikowski acknowledged all this deferred work would need to be done sometime, but he added ADOT recognized its responsibility to address the state's short-term financial issues.

"Drivers will notice a difference, unfortunately," he said.