

ADOT: 15% cut would decimate services, staff

by *Sean Holstege* - Oct. 28, 2009 12:00 AM
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The Arizona Department of Transportation has told the Governor's Office that it would have to close all highway rest stops, shutter most MVD offices and suspend all highway maintenance except for emergency repairs, if the state closes its budget gap through spending cuts alone.

The projections were released Tuesday, the same day ADOT announced it had finished closing 13 rest stops statewide because of a previous round of cuts.

Gov. Jan Brewer had asked state agencies to describe the effect of a 15 percent budget cut. She is pitching a temporary sales-tax increase to raise state revenue; lawmakers have insisted on a cuts-only approach. ADOT Director John Halikowski said that under that scenario, he would have to lay off up to 2,400 employees, or 60 percent of the workforce, in the current fiscal year. Earlier this year, ADOT shaved 450 positions through attrition.

The result of further cuts, Halikowski warned, would be to:

- Close "all but a few key" of the total 61 Motor Vehicle Division offices, where residents get driver's licenses.
- Suspend all highway maintenance "except for emergency response and repairs."
- Suspend operations at all state-line inspection stations, except at the international border.
- Close all rest areas.
- Keep mountain roads closed longer because snow plows would be deployed less frequently.

ADOT is warning that the hypothetical cuts might cause it to lose federal matching funds. That means many highway-improvement projects would not get started.

"We need to maintain a level of funds in our highway account or our federal highway money will be going to other states. We are trying to avoid that," ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said.

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Even if that scenario is avoided, ADOT would be forced to react to emergency repairs. That means ADOT crews would repair pavement and guardrails after crashes, clean up spills and fix roads after washouts or other natural emergencies, but do little else. Deferring routine maintenance leads to more costly emergency repairs later, transportation departments have learned in other states that had to make similar sacrifices in past recessions.

"This has been an ongoing issue for some time," Nintzel said. "There has been a lot of pride in ADOT's maintenance programs that have been proactive. We're talking now about being completely reactive."

In addition, ADOT might have to cease publishing the popular *Arizona Highways* magazine and would reduce operations at Grand Canyon Airport to the point that tour flights would cease. Tours represent 98 percent of the flights and revenue there.

"Staffing cuts of this size are unprecedented, and if implemented, would be devastating to the department, our employees and our customers," Halikowski wrote. "It is our hope that none of the reduction strategies will need to be implemented."

Before ADOT moved in recent weeks to make a 20 percent cut, its total budget for the year was \$398 million, as authorized by the Legislature. ADOT was the last major state agency to respond to Brewer's request for a 15 percent budget-cut scenario. Brewer has pushed unsuccessfully for a 1-cent-per-dollar state sales tax increase to offset plunging tax receipts.

The state had estimated a \$1.5 billion midyear shortfall, but last week legislative analysts predicted the deficit would climb to \$2 billion, or a fifth of the state budget.

Next year is expected to be dire as well, as the depth of the job losses becomes manifest in lower sales and income-tax returns.

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