

ADOT director: Cutting budget will affect Arizonans

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PHOENIX — Arizonans could find themselves with few places to register their vehicles or get a new license — and nowhere along state roads to take a pit stop — if lawmakers take more money from the Department of Transportation budget, its director is warning.

In a memo to the governor's office John Halikowski pointed out that his original \$398 million in state revenues already was cut to \$320 million. ADOT already has announced it will close a dozen of its Motor Vehicle Division offices for the time being, though which ones are still being decided.

And 13 of the state's 18 rest areas are going to be blockaded beginning next month.

Halikowski said taking another 15 percent of that — the target Gov. Jan Brewer gave to all of her agencies — would trim his funding to just \$260 million. At that point, he said, more than half of the agency's 4,000 employees would be laid off, as his agency would have only six months to pare \$60 million in expenses.

He said that will leave funding for just a few "key" MVD offices out of the 61 that now exist throughout the state.

And the last of the rest areas would be closed.

But Halikowski said that would be just the beginning. He said all routine maintenance would be halted "except for emergency response and repair."

ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said the effects of that are more likely to be seen in the higher elevations, with ADOT unable to do routine snow removal on highways and smaller roads.

And Northern Arizona would be affected in another way: The Grand Canyon Airport, now operated by the state, would be downgraded to a general aviation facility. That means no commercial flights, a move that would affect tourism.

Also potentially on the chopping block would be Arizona Highways magazine, supported by ADOT, whose publication would have to be suspended.

Nintzel said while some may question the need for a glossy magazine in the Internet age, ADOT still believes it has value.

"It is still a tool in terms of tourism here in the state," he said. "We stand behind still having it there to serve its purpose."

Less clear is the effect of taking an additional \$60 million in state tax dollars from ADOT would have on road construction.

Most of the road building funds are generated from gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees. These go into the Highway User Revenue Fund which is constitutionally required to use the proceeds for roads.

But Nintzel noted that lawmakers have taken various pots of money that ADOT has set aside for paying contractors. He said that cash is necessary, even in federally funded projects, because Washington does not reimburse the state, which has already spent the money, until after the work is done.

The lack of local dollars, he said, threatens that funding.

"The federal government will stop giving us the funding that we deserve," he said. "They'll send that to other states."

ADOT is one of the last state agencies to submit a plan to the governor. Brewer wants to know the effects of a 15 percent cut ahead of lawmakers having to find ways to deal with what is now a \$2 billion gap between revenues and expenses.