

Rest areas close until state budget settled

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State legislators' inability to adopt a budget is hitting travelers below the belt.

Seven of the nine rest stops along freeways in San Bernardino and Riverside counties are closing today because Caltrans cannot pay a contractor needed to keep them open.

Despite reports late Thursday that lawmakers hammered out a budget deal, workers will start closing the rest areas this morning, Caltrans spokesman Jason Goldman said.

"Just because there is a framework doesn't mean we can pay the vendor," Goldman said.

The rest stops closing are all of those along interstates 15 and 40, and three along Interstate 10 at Whitewater and Cherry Valley, two between Moreno Valley and Palm Springs, and Cactus City, east of Indio.

A contractor that tests the well water supplying the rest areas hasn't been paid since June and will not continue the \$3,000-per-month testing until a budget is in place, Goldman said. The state requires the testing to ensure the water is safe to drink.

Two rest stops along I-10, in Yucaipa and near Blythe, are served by municipal water districts and will remain open, Goldman said.

Even allowing people to stop and rest is risky because people might try to use the water, he said.

Going, Gone

Losing the lavatories is not good news, many travelers said during stops at the Whitewater rest area north of Palm Springs.

"Everybody has to pee," said Jayne Rollins, of Bakersfield. "How can they shut these down? Where are people going to go?"

Rest areas are sometimes the only options to take a break from driving, especially in remote areas such as the Mojave Desert or east of the Coachella Valley.

"After a bit of driving, you need to get out and take time out," said Emma Threlfall, of Lancashire County, England. She and her husband, Glen, are celebrating their honeymoon by driving from San Francisco to Tucson to see friends.

Glen Threlfall agreed the rest stops are important for visitors because it gives them a place to relax.

"And to see the beauty," Glen Threlfall said, pointing at the mountains south of I-10. "Americans, you, might be used to it, but I want to stop and look about."

Starting this morning, crews are placing barriers at the entrances and exits to the rest areas, Goldman said.

All the sites should be closed off by the end of the day.

"I'm glad I'm here today if they're closing tomorrow," joked Don Bumgarner, of Whittier, as he and his rat terrier Bambi took a break from driving east on I-10 on Thursday.

Bumgarner, holding tight on his dog's leash, said he and Bambi both need breaks from the road.

Heading out for a three-week trip to see old buddies from his Marine Corps days in Vietnam, Bumgarner said he's not surprised California cannot provide simple services.

"It would be nice if they could get the budget done on time," he sighed as Bambi rolled in the grass. "But the contractor isn't going to work if they are not getting paid."

The frustration, he said, comes when the Legislature's tardiness hurts residents. After living in the state for 55 years, he almost has grown numb to it, he said.

"Every year there is a budget crisis," Bumgarner said.

Running Late

This is the latest into the fiscal year California has gone without a budget, and the first time the delay has closed rest areas in the region.

Lawmakers are 85 days past the July 1 start of the fiscal year, and could have avoided many setbacks, said Assemblyman Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley.

If legislators agreed to a continuing resolution to keep essential services going, many problems such as shuttered rest stops could be avoided, he said.

"The money is not the whole budget but it is enough to keep the state going," Cook said.

Caltrans also needs to make sure it is spending correctly, he added.

Cook said he plans to call Caltrans to find out if there is a way to keep the rest stops open.

Goldman said Caltrans is exploring some options. The agency might tap the well-testing firm used in Inyo County, if possible, to reopen rest stops sooner if a budget isn't forthcoming.

Cook said the budget process has been frustrating for residents and lawmakers.

"Sometimes I feel like I am crying in the wind," Cook said. "I think everybody thinks it could never go this far, but it did."

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