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Iowa's airports face loss of some services

Possible federal budget cuts raise worries about regional growth efforts.

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The regional airports in Dubuque, Sioux City and Waterloo could lose their air-traffic control towers as part of automatic federal spending cuts scheduled to begin March 1, a memo from the Federal Aviation Administration revealed Friday.

The Des Moines airport could lose overnight air-traffic control service from midnight to 3 a.m., but would not face a tower closure, said Don Smithey, airport director.

The closures and cutbacks would come as part of \$85 billion worth

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of across-the-board spending cuts that could begin next month if Congress and President Barack Obama fail to reach a compromise on budget issues.

The cuts would deeply affect the aviation industry nationwide, forcing furloughs of Federal Aviation Administration employees, job cuts and reduced services. The result for consumers would be long delays at major airports, canceled flights and other frustrations.

The Dubuque, Sioux City and Waterloo airports are on a list of 200 smaller U.S. airports that could lose federal funding for their air-traffic control towers. Des Moines' airport is one of 60 that could lose overnight tower support. If the across-the-board cuts go into effect, federal officials would select 100 airports for service cuts.

Even if the airports lose their towers, it would not mean an instant end to commercial air service to Dubuque, Sioux City and Waterloo — all of which are served by American Airlines. Flights could still take off and land via a series of radio protocols that are used in airports every day.

"It's different than using a tower, but it's no less safe," Smithey said.

Iowa has more than 100 regional airports and only a few have control towers. The radio signal landings are routinely used for general aviation takeoffs and landings.

Still, the loss of a tower could goad airlines — which would face greater financial strain with the federal cutbacks — to end services to some areas. Iowa development officials worried that service reductions would stymie regional growth efforts.

"An airport is an integral part of our infrastructure for growing and sustaining the area," said Barbara Sloniker, Siouxland Chamber of Commerce executive vice president who oversees air service development in Sioux City.

Added Steve Dust, president of the Greater Cedar Valley Alliance and Chamber in Waterloo, "Any kind of an interruption of commercial air service in an area our size is an increased cost to doing business and just another element added to the uncertainty of doing business."

Others remained cautiously optimistic.

"Of course there is concern anytime over potential funding cuts and economic development, but thankfully that is not the case with our airport," said Molly Grover, president and CEO of the Dubuque Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. "We're assured our airport will not be impacted by the changes, and commercial, corporate and general aviation flights will continue even if there is a tower closure."

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Dubuque, Waterloo and Sioux City all participate in a federal program called Essential Air Service, which uses taxpayer money to subsidize commercial air service to smaller communities.

For the federal spending cuts to “impact us through a back door would seem to be counterproductive against the action we have already taken to preserve and continue air service in these communities,” Dust said.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a former Republican member of Congress, urged lawmakers to approve a compromise for \$85 billion in spending cuts that are scheduled to hit every agency March 1.

Republican lawmakers have opposed Obama’s proposal to close tax loopholes in combination with targeted spending cuts to avoid the across-the-board spending cuts.

The full effect of flight delays and cancellations will be felt by April 1, LaHood said.

LaHood had warned lawmakers that Federal Aviation Administration workers would face furloughs of one day every two weeks through the end of September. But his comments Friday escalated the severity of the warnings.

LaHood said discussions were starting Friday with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association to eliminate midnight shift duty at 60 airports across the country.

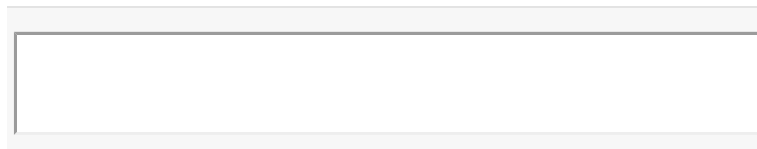
Doug Church, spokesman for the union, said travelers will feel the impact of the cuts throughout spring and summer, with fewer flights and increased delays.

“The impacts of sequestration will be serious,” Church said. “Because these cuts must be across the board, FAA employees could face furloughs, including for air traffic controllers and other safety professionals.”

USA Today contributed USA Today contributed to this story. to this story.

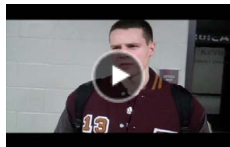
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