

Sequester of federal funds would squeeze Marin programs

By Richard Halstead
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Meals for seniors and funding for school districts, parks, low-income housing and employment assistance would be squeezed in Marin if across-the-board federal budget cuts are implemented as expected this week due to the budget impasse in Washington, D.C.

Democrats and Republicans created the cuts as a sort of doomsday machine to prod them into reaching a compromise to deal with the nation's long-term debt. So far, however, neither side has blinked in this ongoing game of budgetary chicken. In all, the sequester would slice \$1.2 trillion off the federal deficit over the next decade.

Perhaps the biggest blow would be to the Shoreline Unified School District, which would be forced to cut \$114,000 from this year's budget.

Mary Jane Burke, Marin County superintendent of schools, said that of the \$125,000 that Marin County school districts would be forced to cut this year, Shoreline Unified — which includes schools in Point Reyes Station and Tomales — would account for nearly all of it. That is because the cuts scheduled to take effect on Friday include a program that compensates school districts that lose property tax revenue because they contain large amounts of federal land.

Burke estimates that if the federal cuts remain in effect over the next three years, they would cost Marin school districts a total of \$5 million in lost revenue. Most of that revenue would come from programs for special education, which are mandated by the federal government.

Larry Meredith, director of the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services, said the county's Meals on Wheels program, which delivers meals to seniors in their homes, would lose about \$25,000, roughly 5.5 percent of its yearly budget of \$450,000. Meredith remains hopeful that Democrats and Republicans will put aside their differences at the last minute and reach a compromise that will avoid the cuts. If not, he believes the county of Marin would make up the difference.



Orville Teising of Meals on Wheels (Whistlestop) (right) talks with Loel Buckley, 80, while dropping off her meal at her Novato house on Mon. Feb. 25, 2013. With the sequestration of federal funds due to take effect starting on Friday because of the budget impasse in Washington, D.C., Meals on Wheels could possibly lose funding. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)



Orville Teising of Meals on Wheels (Whistlestop) leaves the house of Loel Buckley, 80, after dropping off her meal at her Novato house on Mon. Feb. 25, 2013. With the sequestration of federal funds due to take effect starting on Friday because of the budget impasse in Washington, D.C., Meals on Wheels could possibly lose funding. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

reduction in service levels," said Howard Levitt, a spokesman for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. "Things like restroom maintenance, trash collection, trail repair and maintenance would be affected. We'd be looking at the possible closure of the Marin Headlands visitors' center."

Levitt said visitors would also see a reduction in the number of programs available, "both for the general public and our curriculum-based school programs that reach thousands of school children a year."



Loel Buckley, 80, (left) talks with Orville Teising of Meals on Wheels (Whistlestop) after he dropped off her meal at her Novato house on Mon. Feb. 25, 2013. With the sequestration of federal funds due to take effect starting on Friday because of the budget impasse in Washington, D.C., Meals on Wheels could possibly lose funding. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

"If this low probability event goes forward, we would be looking to address this amount," Meredith said. "No one will be disadvantaged by this."

Spokesmen for both the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Point Reyes National Seashore said their organizations have created contingency plans to cope with the possible cuts. Both estimate they will have to trim their current fiscal year

budgets by 5 to 7 percent if the so-called "sequestration" takes effect.

"In our case, visitors could experience an across-the-board

John Dell'Osso, a spokesman for the Point Reyes National Seashore, said his organization would take similar steps.

In addition, Dell'Osso said, "We're looking at the possibility of reducing the hours of our visitors' centers here, and we're not filling vacant positions."

Racy Ming, director of the Workforce Investment Board of Marin County, said the Marin Employment Connection, which assists people looking for work, would also have to cut its budget by 5 to 7 percent this fiscal year if the planned federal cuts materialize. Ming said the cut is more likely to be 7 percent because it would have to be implemented in the

remaining seven months of the fiscal year. Ming said she wasn't sure what changes such cuts would necessitate, because the state is requiring, for the first time, that 25 percent of the budget be spent on direct training.

Lewis Jordan, executive director of the Marin Housing Authority, declined to estimate how large a slice the federal cuts would take from his agency's budget. But, Jordan said, "It could have a devastating effect on us." He said nearly all of the housing authority's revenue comes from the federal government.

The housing authority oversees 500 units of public housing in Marin and administers a program that supplies 1,500 Section 8 housing vouchers to low-income Marin residents, which covers a large portion of their monthly rent.

Jordan said the cuts wouldn't cause anyone to lose their Section 8 voucher immediately. But he said the housing authority might have to reduce the number of vouchers in the future by not issuing new ones when people transition out of the program.

Jordan said, "There are currently 9,000 people on the waiting list."