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Yakima County wants to take Fridays off

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SARA GETTYS/Yakima Herald-Republic
Yakima County Courthouse

YAKIMA, Wash. -- In a cost-cutting move, Yakima County plans to close the county courthouse to the public on Fridays beginning July 1, commissioners announced Thursday.

Details of the impending closure remain to be worked out. Among them are negotiations with county labor unions on reduced work hours and complying with a state constitutional requirement that Superior Court be open every day, except weekends and holidays.

The courthouse closure is designed to overcome a projected \$500,000 shortfall in the 2010 general fund budget, a combination of revenue declines and a pledge by commissioners to restore money to the county's reserves.

"The commissioners are committed to a four-day work week to reduce labor costs," County Commissioner Mike Leita told other elected county officials and department heads Thursday. "The courthouse will be closed on Fridays. There are a number of operating issues. We have six months to get that done."

Leita said the court issue highlights the problem of having both administrative and court functions in the county courthouse at North First Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

County commissioners are expected to ask voters as early as next year to approve a bond issue to build a separate courts building in a parking lot north of the county jail. A county task force two years ago recommended the new building at the end of a lengthy review of future county facility needs.

As part of the plan to shutdown the courthouse on Fridays, every county office would be closed, including the auditor, assessor, treasurer and planning departments.

County hourly employees who work 40 hours a week will see their work week reduced to a four nine-hour days, effectively cutting their take-home pay by 10 percent.

Some county employees work 37.5 hours per week.

County Human Resources Director Linda Dixon said the county is prohibited from reducing the pay of salaried employees who will be expected to do more work in fewer hours.

Elected officials and department heads could opt to retain staff at 40 total hours in a week, but that would mean cutting positions or making other cuts to meet the overall budget reduction.

Currently, county labor agreements allow some employees to work four 10-hour days per week. Scheduling nine-hour days four days a week would have to be negotiated into existing labor agreements.

Yvette Lewis, staff representative for Council 2 of the Washington State Council of County and City Employees in Yakima, said she expects talks on hours cuts will start shortly after Jan. 1.

"We would negotiate the impact of shortening the hours. If that means jobs are saved, then that is something we will look at," she said. "I really don't know what their intent is at this time."

The council represents about 250 of the county's employees, most of whom work in the courthouse.

The county has as many as 16 bargaining units.

The impact on Superior Court may be the most thorny issue for the county as it plans to close the courthouse on Fridays.

The state Constitution and state law forbid Superior and District court closures on days other than weekends or holidays, said Dick Marler, a Yakima Valley native and former District Court judge who is now director of the judicial services division in the state Administrative Office of the Courts.

Leita said Yakima County will find a way to abide by state law and the constitutional requirement to keep the courts open five days a week. But he reiterated that the courthouse will be closed Fridays, as planned.

It is possible Superior Court could be operated from the courtrooms in the basement of the county jail at Front Street and Martin Luther King Jr. on Fridays, he said.

It remained unclear, however, whether the court clerk would also need to be open to the public under the county budget-cutting plan.

Harold Delia, administrative consultant to District and Superior Courts, said he would prefer to swallow another budget cut than close Superior Court.

"The court understands we all have to take our share," Delia said. "For efficiency in getting cases out, it would be better to take a budget cut."

It was unclear Thursday whether other counties have proposed closing their courthouses. But Marler said the issue of closing courts has come up more regularly as counties grapple with shrinking budgets.

In response, Washington Supreme Court Chief Justice Gerry Alexander sent a letter to several counties in October, advising them that courts should not be closed.

One District Court tried rolling furloughs to cut costs on an interim basis. But the idea was soon dropped because it wasn't workable, Marler said.

Marler said a court closure could open the county to lawsuits from litigants or criminal defendants unable to access the court.

"I think those are really fruitful opportunities for litigation," Marler said.

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