

Sequestration threatens airport tower

By [Vicki Hillhouse](#)

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WALLA WALLA — The Walla Walla Regional Airport could lose its air-traffic control tower as part of the sweeping automatic spending cuts scheduled by the federal government later this week.

Walla Walla made the long list of communities whose towers would be threatened for closure if the automatic cuts known as sequestration go into effect as scheduled March 1, according to a list released Friday by the U.S. Department of Transportation. This list also includes Pendleton's tower.

From the list of 251 towers, 100 will be closed.

Local airport operators said closure of Walla Walla's contract tower would not likely have a direct impact on commercial and other air service. Alaska Airlines, the Seattle carrier that serves Walla Walla with daily flights to Seattle, already operates in other communities that don't have towers, including Pullman and Wenatchee, said Port of Walla Walla Executive Director Jim Kuntz. It's not uncommon for small airports to operate without one, he said.

"In this particular circumstance with our control tower we don't think there's any immediate impact to aviation," Kuntz said.

Port of Walla Walla Commission President and owner of World Wide Travel Service Paul Schneidmiller said he also believes the impact on flights here would be "minimal."

But the big picture painted by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the American Association of Airport Executives as a result of the changes was much bleaker overall. The changes anticipated to reduce about \$600 million in costs for fiscal 2013 are expected to have a ripple effect throughout the travel system that would extend from major metropolitan airports into the smallest pockets of rural America, according to U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Changes include furloughs for most of the Federal Aviation Administration's 47,000 employees for one day per pay period until the end of September with a maximum of two days per pay period; elimination of midnight shifts in 60 towers across the country; closure of more than 100 air-traffic control towers at airports with fewer than 150,000 flight operations or 10,000 commercial operations per year; and reduction of preventive maintenance and equipment provisioning for all National Airspace System equipment.

The furloughs and facility shut-downs are expected to begin in April.

"As a consequence of employee furloughs and prolonged equipment outages resulting from lower parts inventories and fewer technicians, travelers should expect delays," LaHood wrote in a joint letter with FAA head Michael Huerta to major aviation groups.

"Flights to major cities like New York, Chicago and San Francisco could experience delays of up to 90

minutes during peak hours because we will have fewer controllers on staff.”

The letter anticipated airlines will ultimately change their schedules and cancel flights to adjust to the impacts of the furloughs.

According to the American Association of Airport Executives, 251 FAA contract towers handle 28 percent of tower operations in the U.S. Many provide the link between rural communities and the national transportation system, the agency explained in a statement on the impact of sequestration.

Other Washington airports on the list for consideration of closure are Grant County International in Moses Lake; Olympia Regional in Olympia; Snohomish County Airport in Everett; Renton Municipal in Renton; Felts Field in Spokane; Tacoma Narrows in Tacoma; and Yakima Air Terminal/McAllister Field in Yakima.

Oregon airports at risk are in Klamath Falls, North Bend, Pendleton, Salem and Troutdale.