

Peter Friedmann's View from Washington DC
October, 2013

This month's View provides a glimpse of how the "shutdown" is working (or not working) here in DC. A few experiences of the past week.

Within hours of the final rejection by the Senate Democrats of unacceptable terms (defund or delay Obamacare) demanded by the House Republicans for a Continuing Resolution to fund the govt beyond midnight September 30, the barricades went up. Barricades erected around the monuments and parks here in DC. Each barricade had a pre-printed sign with the National Park Service logo: "This facility closed due to GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN".

A skeptic might ask if the pain of this budget impasse has been orchestrated. If there isn't enough money to pay park rangers to stay at their posts, then where does the money come from to pay even more people to find, transport and erect hundreds of barriers, and then to guard them to keep tourists away from the Lincoln Memorial, the Martin Luther King Memorial, etc.?

The following day, WW II veterans, on an Honored Flight visit to DC to see the WW II Memorial, were not to be deterred. The men, well into their 80's and 90's, their last trip, their only chance to see their memorial, in wheelchairs and pushing walkers, broke through the barriers, past the Park Police, to the cheers of tourists and onlookers.

Is it a real "shutdown" if each federal agency can determine who are "essential" federal employees, required to show up for work even during a shutdown? Many of the most visible federal services continue. Air traffic controllers, customs agents at the ports, TSA screeners at the airports. Functions paid out of trust funds, rather than appropriated dollars, continue to be performed. Federal highway construction programs, for example. Yesterday the Secretary of Defense declared all military and civilian employees of the Defense Dept. "essential", and thus, back to work. As time passes, more federal employees in other departments are being declared essential. But as time passes, the impact of the shutdown is increasingly felt, as personnel are not there to issue permits, review applications, do the "mundane" tasks that we expect the government to perform.

The furlough of federal workers is felt in many areas, but some are more critical, and thus will have greater impact, than others. Two situations have gained visibility. First, the Dept. of Interior had to close many of its lands, at the very beginning of hunting season. Second, while Customs and Border Protection and Food & Drug Administration officers and inspectors are on duty, facilitating the flow of commerce across our air and marine terminals, the Environmental Protection Agency has shuttered its import inspection/permitting functions. Farmers are concerned about shortages of pesticides and fertilizer, much of which is imported.

Capitol Hill is closed. Well, sort of. Most entrances to the 6 House and Senate Office buildings are closed. Many offices have their front doors closed, or locked. Many don't answer their general office phones. They are short of staff, many of whom have been sent home, as "non-essential". But if you know which entrances are open, and if you know how to reach the staff that is working, on their cell or smartphones, then once in the offices, the atmosphere is remarkably calm. One can have excellent conversations with the senior staff and the Members of Congress - who have been instructed to stay close in case of votes. With few constituents visiting, no travel by the Members and their senior staff, few Committee hearings, last week and this have been two of the more productive weeks for the kind of serious substantive discussion of issues that is essential for effective lobbying. No complaints from this lobbyist.

As we get closer to the possibility of default if Congress fails to increase the Debt Limit, will one side blink? Will more federal functions and the personnel who perform them, be declared essential? Will the public just tune out the entire mess? Many more examples will be featured in the press in coming days. Ultimately, the public's willingness to accept the situation will determine how Congress and the President resolve this very fundamental dispute over the federal budget. We may be hearing the words "Grand Bargain" again.