

No rest to save Saturday

Activists help push legislation to bolster Postal Service finances

As this issue of *The Postal Record* was being prepared, Congress was just returning to Washington after its six-week summer recess, an annual break that not only provides some respite from the blistering August heat, but gives our elected officials an opportunity to meet with constituents in their home districts. And many NALC activists across the country seized this opportunity to emphasize to senators and representatives alike the importance of saving Saturday mail delivery service.

Even before that summer break began, there were clear signs that letter carrier activism was working. One of the most obvious indications came July 21, when the House Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia subcommittee of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee passed legislation designed to credit the Postal Service with between \$50 billion and \$75 billion in pension assets that had been unfairly allocated by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

The bill, H.R. 5746, was introduced July 15 by subcommittee chair Stephen Lynch (D-MA) and marked up by the committee six days later. It's meant to help the Postal Service recoup the tens of billions of dollars in surplus funds it has accumulated in the Civil Service Retirement System since 1971, the year the taxpayer-supported Post Office Department was reorganized into a self-sufficient government agency. This money was siphoned away by the OPM, which has been charging CSRS benefits paid for

pre-1971 service to the Postal Service instead of the U.S. Treasury.

"Congressman Lynch's bill is a terrific start," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "It lays some solid groundwork for restoring financial stability to the USPS."

Just exactly how much the OPM has overcharged USPS remains a topic of debate. The Service's Office of the Inspector General reported in January that the amount was \$75 billion; the Postal Regulatory Commission, however, said in June that the figure is likely to fall between \$50 billion and \$55 billion.

"Even so," Rolando said, "to recover tens of billions at a time that the Service is losing billions—that would be a major win for us all, craft and employer alike."

Once everyone agrees on the actual pension overpayment figures, Rep. Lynch's bill calls for transferring that surplus amount into the Postal Service Retiree Health Benefit Fund. However, the timing of the transfer would remain to be decided by the OPM.

"No matter what, if the Postal Service can get that money back and then turn around and use it to fully fund the retiree health benefit account," Rolando said, "the Postal Service will be in a great position to then ask Congress to take away the burdensome pre-funding provisions that have caused it to lose so much money in the last few years."

Right now, the 2006 postal reform act requires the USPS to pre-fund its retiree health benefit account at about \$5.5 billion a year through 2016. The economic crash was still off everyone's radar screen when the highly compressed pre-funding schedule was formulated.



Kansas State President Rod Holub (l), State Director of Retirees Dave Spero and 3rd District Congressional District Liaison Joan Spero (r) reached out to Kansas Rep. Stephene Moore to explain the importance of saving Saturday delivery. As a registered nurse, Moore has been very vocal about the negative impact curtailing a day of delivery would have on prescription medicine deliveries.

No other government agency or private company is required to do this, and if the USPS hadn't been required to make such gigantic pre-funding payments, it would have been profitable in three of the past four years—despite the worst recession in memory.

“Giving the Postal Service some financial breathing room will allow it to back away from some of its most misguided plans to save money,” Rolando said, “including cutting Saturday delivery.”

“This legislation advances our fight to save Saturday delivery and preserve letter carrier jobs. The fight is far from over, but we are making progress.”

The 8-1 vote sent the bill to the full committee, where it was awaiting further action. At last count, 71 House members had signed on as co-sponsors, a number bolstered by the work of NALC activists contacting their representatives over the break.

Movement on a bill has started on the Senate side as well, with members of the NALC's Legislative and Political Department meeting with key Senate leaders to discuss a companion bill to the Lynch bill. The senators have reached out to NALC for input into legislation that is being drafted, though there were no firm details on what that legislation might look like as this issue went to press.

Saturday saved—for now

Approaching the service cut issue more directly, letter carriers could claim a key victory in our campaign to save Saturday mail delivery, thanks to some intense lobbying before Congress' August recess. In marking up separate appropriations bills, lawmakers in both the House and Senate wound up leaving in place the specific, carry-over passage that requires that “6-day delivery and

rural delivery of mail shall continue at not less than the 1983 level.”

It's that appropriations language that grants Congress the final say on the number of delivery service days—a figure that has remained the same in every federal budget since 1984.

“There are several steps that can be taken before we decide to go to five-day service,” said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the chamber's No. 2 Democratic leader. “There's a question about whether they overpaid into their pension system and we haven't resolved that—and that's a big amount of money. It's billions.”

Meanwhile, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial Services successfully marked up its own bill on July 29, also with the language on six-day delivery left unchanged. The full House Appropriations Committee had yet to take up consideration of the bill as this issue was being prepared.

Working the PRC

The Washington battlefield in the struggle to save Saturday mail delivery wasn't confined to Capitol Hill or Postal Service headquarters. The Postal Regulatory Commission was deluged with thousands of messages from Americans who depend on Saturday mail delivery, and who understand the value of delivery service six days a week.

Carriers, small business owners and postal patrons all weighed in with the PRC in droves. In June, for example, an overwhelming number of the comments, by a 2,716 to 223 margin, conveyed the same message: Saturday delivery is crucial for the Postal Service's long-term survival.

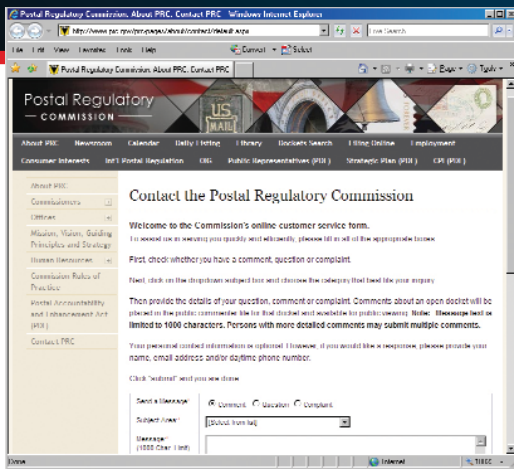
“The more the PRC hears from the American people,” President Rolando



At the National Rurals Letter Carriers' Association convention in Spokane, WA in August, President Rolando stressed the importance of all of the postal unions working together to save Saturday delivery.

One NALC activist shows her support for saving Saturday delivery—both coming and going—at the 'Paychecks pay the bills' rally in L.A.





The Postal Regulatory Commission's website has been seeking public comments about USPS' plan to cut a day of delivery. You can find instructions on how to submit a comment to the PRC, by mail or online, at nalc.org/saturday.

Work rally planned

On October 2, thousands of Americans from across the country will descend on Washington, DC in an effort to unify the country and get America back to work as part of the "One Nation Working Together" march. Letter carriers from the mid-Atlantic region will be marching with the broader labor movement and many other organizations committed to ensuring that America moves forward and not backward. In addition, in cities across the country there will be similar actions, to remind the 112th Congress that they need to continue to fight for working families.

said, "the more likely that it will see the value of keeping Saturday mail delivery and recommend that Congress votes against the Saturday cut."

Then in August, Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown contacted the Commission to make sure it knew that states like Oregon, which have established vote-by-mail election systems, would be directly and negatively affected by the Postal Service's proposed elimination of Saturday mail delivery. Voter turnout in recent elections in Oregon, which first executed its full vote-by-mail operation in 1998, has been among the nation's highest.

"We know that Oregonians like vote-by-mail because we can measure the effect it has had on turnout over the past few election cycles," Brown said. In 2008, Oregon's registered voters turned out at an outstanding rate of 85.7 percent. Voting by mail "has become an indelible part of our electoral DNA," she said.

"But reducing mail deliveries from six to five days a week would jeopardize a critical part of the voting routines that have become such a familiar part of our vote-by-mail experience," she added. "I worry that any delay in the system, any action by government that clogs the process, could disenfranchise voters in Oregon and in the increasing number of states using mail voting."

The PRC continues to gather public comments, and will make its non-binding recommendation to Congress later this year.

A boost from our brothers and sisters

Trade unionists throughout the labor movement delivered a loud and clear message to the NALC this summer: You are not alone in the fight to save Saturday delivery and to postal worker jobs.

At the Anaheim Convention in August, United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts brought letter carriers to their feet time and again, pledging his union's backing of our fight against cutting service to save money. "Solidarity doesn't flow one way like a river," he said. "Solidarity is like a huge ocean. Your fight is our fight."

Also speaking to convention delegates, National Rural Letter Carriers' Association President Don Cantriel noted that his organization's members have as much to lose as city carriers if Saturdays get cut. The Service "may be sick," he said, "it may need a little medication," but eliminating a day of delivery service is not the cure.

And American Postal Workers Union President William Burrus asked delegates, "How can [Postmaster General John Potter] have the audacity to tell the American public, 'You can't receive mail on Saturday?'"

"We've been in that fight" to save Saturday delivery, Burrus said. "Potter's not going to get five-day delivery."

And AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka pledged labor's full support.

On Friday of the convention week, President Rolando and thousands of letter carriers took our cause to the streets of Los Angeles, in front of the watchful eye of the news media, joining with union members from dozens of other trades for the "Paychecks Pay the Bills" jobs rally on the front lawn of L.A. City Hall (*see page 59*).

Throughout August, Rolando continued rallying the troops for support, speaking at both the NRLCA convention in Spokane, WA, and the APWU convention in Detroit.

The APWU and the NALC share a common history of struggle, he said, and work "side by side every day" to fight for better working conditions for postal employees.

All the postal unions must work together during a time of "tremendous struggle for the Postal Service," he told the rural carriers' gathering.

"City letter carriers know that they can count on the support of the APWU and the NRLCA as we fight the Postal Service's misguided plan to eliminate Saturday delivery," he said, and he praised the APWU for taking the fight to the streets of Detroit in a "Save Saturday Service" march through the streets of the Motor City.

"I'm convinced we will win the battle, and that postal employees have a very bright future," he said. ☒