

A void at the top gives PMG free rein



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The Postal Service and much of Washington are caught in a time warp. For some reason, they still think it's 2009 and that the Postal Service is in terminal decline.

The postmaster general's "shrink to survive" austerity plan was developed in the depths of the global financial crisis. Then, the economy was collapsing, mail volume was plummeting and the pre-funding payments were crushing the Postal Service. The crisis imposed heavy costs: Nearly 200,000 postal jobs have been lost, service standards have been cut and the Postal Service has been starved of investment.

Fortunately, today the economy is recovering. Revenue from the booming e-commerce business is offsetting more moderate declines in letter mail volume. And the Postal Service is operationally back in the black, even as the effects of massive downsizing and reduced service standards have begun to fray the quality of service—severely, in many cities and states. The Postal Service is nevertheless poised for a major comeback if only its leadership would stop focusing on the rear-view mirror. What we need now is vision and leadership.

Sadly, that is not coming from L'Enfant Plaza and it's not coming from either end of Pennsylvania Avenue, where both the White House and some key leaders in Congress remain enthralled with the PMG's misguided doomsday vision. Rather than acknowledge the massive amount of so-called "right-sizing" that has already happened, or admit that the USPS' finances are improving even as they remain fragile due to the pre-funding mandate, key leaders in Washington remain committed to continued austerity, no matter how self-destructive to the future of the USPS.

Indeed, on April 8 the House Oversight and Government Reform (OGR) Committee held a hearing on the Obama administration's postal proposals included in the FY 2015 budget—and the chairman of the committee, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), decided to embrace them. In fact, Issa promised to draft new legislation that includes these proposals.

Although NALC welcomes the news that the OGR Committee has decided to set aside the truly destructive H.R. 2748, we will strongly oppose any bill that embraces the FY 2015 budget proposals from the White House. Those proposals recycle ideas first adopted in deficit-reduction talks in 2011 when House Majority

Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) proposed the elimination of Saturday delivery as a way to reduce the deficit—despite our protests that the Postal Service should not be part of such talks since we receive no taxpayer subsidies.

The Saturday service cut was included in the administration's FY 2012 budget proposal, along with a totally inadequate restructuring of the pre-funding mandate that would only delay the Postal Service's financial crisis, not solve it. These and other flawed ideas also were included in the following three budgets prepared by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) since 2011.

To be fair, the White House did include modest pricing, products and pension reforms in its budget that would be helpful, and has made clear that it is open to finding alternatives to the proposals it has offered. We will actively engage with OMB officials to build a workable consensus. Moreover, thanks to thousands of letter carrier activists, there are hundreds of members of Congress who support sensible reforms (H.R. 630 and S. 316), and a near majority of the House of Representatives (213 as of April 15) supports a resolution in favor of continued six-day delivery.

But for now, the PMG and key power-brokers seem wedded to the same wrong-headed and now-outdated reforms that the Postal Service cooked up in 2009. The question is: Why?

I believe one of the main reasons is the absolute void at the top of the USPS' governance structure. To be blunt, the USPS Board of Governors has effectively ceased to function as either a guiding or restraining force on management. It no longer has a quorum to make decisions or exert influence. There are now five vacancies—out of nine seats! Two sitting members are in their final year of service and another's term has expired, though he is serving a single hold-over year while a replacement is sought. Partisan gridlock in the Senate has prevented any new appointments.

In this environment, there is no counter weight to the PMG's destructive service cuts. Nobody is there to keep him honest or to offer better ideas. Indeed, three of the four governors were appointed by President George W. Bush and may simply share the PMG's austerity agenda.

We need to break the partisan gridlock. That's why we cannot give up on our efforts to elect more USPS-friendly and letter carrier-friendly representatives to Congress this year. Those friends have helped fend off assaults on our jobs, benefits and collective-bargaining rights—and have helped us save Saturday delivery multiple times over the past five years. But we need more of them, regardless of which party they come from. The only way to end the void at the top of the Postal Service and to stop the PMG's misguided agenda is to elect a better Congress. Together, we can make that happen in 2014, if we all do our part.