

‘Fast Track’ limps across finish line, more legislative news

Just before last month’s issue of *The Postal Record* went to press, it looked as if the controversial trade promotion authority (TPA) bill—better known as “Fast Track”—was down for the count following a massive lobbying effort by thousands of labor union and other activists from across the United States, including a sizeable number of active and retired NALC members.

“But to paraphrase Mark Twain,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said, “the report of Fast Track’s death was an exaggeration.”

Under Fast Track, a current or future president holds the authority to negotiate trade agreements, leaving Congress with little more than a rubber-stamp role. Lawmakers would be unable to provide a thorough review or to make amendments, and permitted only to give such measures simple up-or-down votes.

So when the House of Representatives decisively voted on June 12 to reject a side bill that was deemed crucial to Fast Track’s successful passage, it appeared

that the lobbying against it had succeeded. And few Washington observers believed that the Senate would be inclined to press forward and take up the House’s modified trade deal package.

In the days that followed the House vote, however, highly motivated and determined lawmakers worked through a maze of deals and procedural tricks in a concerted effort to cobble together a Fast Track measure that would be deemed acceptable by a sufficient number of House and Senate Democrats and Republicans—not to mention President Obama, who was among Fast Track’s biggest boosters.

And on June 29, following this rare display of bipartisan cooperation, Obama signed the measure into law.

President Rolando, though disappointed by this outcome, nevertheless supplied a measure of perspective to it.

“With Fast Track, the balance of power was clearly not in our favor,” the president said. “Even so, workers from all over the country took a stand and told

Congress that it should retain its checks-and-balances power to fully debate and negotiate trade agreements—rather than give to this and future administrations virtually unchecked authority to sign the deals brought before them.”

And even though the NALC is unhappy with how the Fast Track vote turned out, Rolando said that the union remains on the lookout to seize any chance to strengthen protections, for letter carriers and the Postal Service alike, in future trade negotiations.

“In the coming months, Congress will still have opportunities to at least review individual trade deals and then vote them up or down,” Rolando said. “As Congress weighs the upcoming Trans-Pacific Partnership—or TPP—our representatives need to hear from us if the TPP harms the ability of the Postal Service to innovate.”

For example, if the TPP has a provision that could prevent the Postal Service from being allowed to use its vast postal retail network to offer low-cost banking services for the tens of millions of Americans who are unbanked or under-banked, we would strongly oppose its approval. “So letter carriers should expect to see, and be ready to take part in, a great deal of debate once TPP is ready for a vote on Capitol Hill,” Rolando said.

Two other trade deals probably will not come up for consideration until after Obama leaves office, although under Fast Track each could still have damaging implications for USPS. One is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) with the European Union, a body that has consistently called for deregulation of USPS and a phase-out of its constitutionally mandated universal service obligation.

The other is a Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA) with the World Trade

A Jan. 31 day of action against ‘Fast Track’ and TPP



Photo courtesy of Alex Garland Photography

Organization (WTO), which also could step-up pressure on the U.S. to privatize the Postal Service. In addition, TiSA contains provisions that could threaten USPS' ability to hold on to its profitable package delivery service as part of its universal service obligation.

"Our members should add these future trade deals to the ever-lengthening list of reasons why we all need to stay active and engaged in the political process," Rolando said, "in 2016 and beyond."

Rural Postal Act introduced in Senate

Sens. Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), John Tester (D-MT), Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Gary Peters (D-MI) introduced on July 9 a measure designed to address recent and significant delays in mail delivery to rural postal customers, thanks to the Postal Service's phase-out of its overnight delivery standards for local mail over the last few years.

If passed, not only would this proposed Rural Postal Act restore those standards, it also would make permanent the requirement that USPS deliver mail at least six days a week and impose a two-year moratorium on the closing of mail-processing facilities.

"Letter carriers long have known that the best path toward ensuring high-quality mail service in this country is to address the crushing mandate to pre-fund future retiree health benefits decades in advance," said President Rolando, who noted that this mandate has accounted for about 85 percent of the Postal Service's overall losses since it went into effect in 2007, and for 100 percent of the red ink over the past couple of years.

Although the Rural Postal Act does not address the core financial challenges that the Postal Service faces, he said, "it represents a positive step in the right direction.

"And thanks in part to Senator Heitkamp," he said, "there is now a core

group of senators from both parties that is focusing on the Postal Service."

Heitkamp is the ranking member of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management. In introducing this bill, she cited the collapse of mail delivery performance in the second quarter of Fiscal Year 2015 (covering January through March), when just 63 percent of mail was delivered on time.

The junior senator from North Dakota also highlighted the disproportionate impact that plant closings have had on mail delivery in rural states, where small populations of postal customers are dispersed across sometimes-vast geographical distances.

"I've heard from folks from across our state that they aren't receiving their mail and prescription drugs on time, or their local post office has had its operating hours significantly reduced," Heitkamp said in a statement after the bill was introduced.

"This isn't the final step to fixing all the problems with the Postal Service," she said, "but any efforts to do so need to include these kinds of protections and support for rural America, and I'll keep building support so we can meet the postal needs of all Americans."

Meanwhile, NALC continues to work with postal industry leaders and with Postmaster General Megan Brennan to build consensus around a comprehensive legislative fix to the pre-funding mess and to give the USPS the tools it needs to innovate and prosper in the 21st century.

6-day mail, service standards included in spending bill

The full House Appropriations Committee on June 17 approved the Fiscal Year 2016 Subcommittee on Financial Services



Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND)



Sen. John Tester (D-MT)



Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO)



Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI)

and General Government's (FSGG) annual appropriations bill.

And thanks in part to the extensive lobbying efforts of NALC activists and other interested parties, this spending measure preserves the longstanding budget language mandating that USPS maintain six-day mail delivery.

"The inclusion of six-day language in the base bill is a victory for letter carriers," President Rolando said, "and it's something of a change in direction from the last Congress, where some House members were looking for any opportunity to eliminate Saturday mail delivery."

For decades, the appropriations language requiring USPS to maintain delivery frequency "at 1983 levels"—that is, six days a week—has been renewed annually, tied to an allocation to the Postal Service that pays the agency back for free mail for the blind and for postage used by U.S. citizens overseas—such as military members serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere—to cast absentee ballots in elections.

Unlike during last year's appropriations process, the underlying bill this time around contained the six-day language from the start. And for the first time in years, there were no attempts at the committee level to strip it out or to amend it.

Among those speaking during the appropriations hearing in support of the USPS was Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH), who praised letter carriers—almost a quarter of whom are military veterans—as "a trustworthy and recognized presence on our streets, at our offices, and in the places we call home." She noted that pre-funding is the real reason for the Postal Service's financial problems in recent years.

"This requirement remains unique only to the USPS," she said. "Who ever heard of such a steep slope of payment for any retirement plan?"

The Senate Appropriations Committee had not yet begun work on its own FSGG measure by the time this magazine was being prepared; the full House of Representatives was expected to consider its measure in the coming weeks.

In addition to its postal-focused provisions, this spending bill typically provides the annual funding for the District of Columbia, as well as for the Treasury and Justice departments and a number of other agencies.

In the news media

Wisconsin's *Green Bay Gazette* on July 20 ran an op-ed by President Rolando, a piece that rebutted a July 14 article by a Virginia think tank that has been trying to get rural areas fighting with cities and the "Heartland" fighting with the country's coasts over postal services. Almost identical versions of the think tank's article ran on June 29 in Maine's *Bangor Daily News* and on June 26 in Missouri's *Kansas City Star*.

In his *Green Bay Gazette* op-ed—as well as in his pieces in the *Bangor Daily News* on July 6 and in the *Kansas City Star* on July 1—Rolando let readers know that all of this country's regions and types of populations are in the fight for—and depend on—quality mail service, and he explained some of the actual threats to the Postal Service.

Illinois' *Bellefonte News-Democrat* ran on July 8 an op-ed from President Rolando, a response to two earlier letters to the *News-Democrat's* editor. The first letter asserted that a program in Sweden, in which letter carriers in that country help senior citizens, supposedly wouldn't happen in the United States. The second letter generally defended letter carriers, but it didn't mention that there has been precisely that type of program here since 1982: Carrier Alert.

Rolando used his op-ed not just to set the record straight, but also to mention the Postal Service's operating profit and to urge readers to tell lawmakers to address the pre-funding problem.

Rolando on July 7 had an op-ed piece in Minnesota's *Duluth News Tribune*. He discussed not only the partly successful effort by residents and civic leaders there to preserve mail processing, but also the threats that remain both in terms of processing as well as Saturday and door delivery. Rolando's commentary showed why proposed cuts in service are not justified by the facts and would be harmful to residents/businesses and counterproductive for USPS itself.

The president had an op-ed in the June 29 edition of Hillsboro's *The Journal-News*, responding to a June 22 op-ed about the Postal Service.

Rolando had a letter to the editor in the June 16 *Arizona Republic*. The letter rebutted an earlier, misleading letter that called for eliminating four agencies—USPS among them—reasoning that the federal government is too expensive and the national debt is too big. Rolando corrected the record on USPS' funding and then used this opportunity to show why there is broad support for the Postal Service, including among conservatives.

Idaho State Association President **John Paige** had a letter to the editor in the June 10 edition of the *Idaho Statesman*. In July, Paige had letters to the editor in *Idaho Statesman*, *Coeur d'Alene Press* and *Twin Falls Times-News*.

A June 11 story in Elyria, OH's *The Chronicle Telegram*, about letter carriers who have been the victims of dog bites, featured personal stories from Elyria Branch 196 carriers **Sean Justice**, **Grace Boden**, **Shelley Theman** and **Rob Magdaleno**, who described some of their encounters with dangerous dogs. **PR**