

# DECISION 2016

## Letter carriers can't afford to 'sit out' election

**L**etter carriers have so much at stake in elections.

Heard that line before? You probably have, and for good reason—because it's absolutely true.

Here's the short version of why it's true: Letter carriers are employed by the U.S. Postal Service. Although USPS receives no taxpayer money and it sustains itself through the sale of postage and postal products, it's still an agency of the federal government. That means that Congress has a lot to say about how the Postal Service operates—a say that is subject to the approval of the president.

“So on top of all the other things letter carriers have to worry about while delivering the country's mail and packages at least six days a week,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “We must also be mindful of our 535-member board of directors on Capitol Hill—that is, Congress—not to mention whoever occupies the White House.”

On Nov. 8, letter carriers and tens of millions of our fellow citizens will head to the polls to elect a new president and to elect or re-elect one-third of the Senate and every member of the House of Representatives. “Whom you vote for on Election Day is your business, of course,” Rolando said. “But before you cast your vote, we ask you at least to consider how your

decisions could directly affect your employer, your livelihood and your future.”

With the general election only three months away, *The Postal Record* takes this opportunity to help cut through the chaos of campaign commercials and stump-speech soundbites to outline some of the issues that the NALC asks you to consider before you head to the polls or drop your ballot in the mail.

### Dollars, sense

For most Americans, the phrase “pocketbook issues” during an election usually means taxes and entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare. All citizens have a stake in those programs—and they are important. But for letter carriers, there are many more pocketbook issues that directly affect the money we have in our wallets and purses.

Our collective-bargaining rights, which have allowed us to secure multiple pay increases in almost every year since 1970, are a function of the law. Congress can confer these rights and it can take them away. If you don't think that can happen if the wrong folks are elected to Congress and the White House, look what has happened in recent years to public employees in Wisconsin and Michigan. Indeed, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI), chairman of the

Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee (the committee that has oversight of the Postal Service), has called for placing USPS in bankruptcy and voiding all postal collective-bargaining agreements.

Since 2010, carriers have faced repeated attempts by GOP leaders in the House to slash federal employee health care and pension benefits. The budgets that have been passed in the House—but blocked by the Senate and the White House—call for converting the Federal Employees Health Benefit program into a “premium support” program and for raising employee contributions for CSRS and FERS pensions by 5.5 percent of pay. A voucher system to buy health plans on the individual health insurance market instead of comprehensive group health plans would shift thousands of dollars in costs to you, whether you're an active carrier or retiree, and higher pension contributions would amount to a massive pay cut for every letter carrier.

The need to address the consequences of the pre-funding mandate is another compelling example of why elections matter, because lawmakers will play a key role in any such action. As we all know, the 2006 congressional mandate that the Postal Service pre-fund future retiree health benefits decades into the future—something

no other public or private entity in the country has to do—is responsible for almost all of the red ink that USPS has incurred since the Great Recession.

Even as USPS faced recession-driven financial losses and a resulting increase in congressional scrutiny, there simply weren't enough Postal Service supporters—or even objective legislators—on Capitol Hill able to muster the necessary backing for legislation that might have spared the agency years of severe belt-tightening, congressional hearings and negative press.

More recently, USPS' financial situation has rebounded somewhat, with the agency reporting billion-dollar operating profits thanks mainly to the increasing popularity of package delivery and to stabilizing letter volumes. But we still await a solution to the pre-funding mandate.

That's why NALC, over the last few years, has helped lead a coalition of postal unions and prominent mailers to promote a creative consensus postal reform package. If implemented, these reforms would go a long way toward relieving the pre-funding burden, while positioning the Postal Service to thrive in the 21st century.

In May, President Rolando urged the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee—the committee in that chamber with USPS oversight—to consider this consensus plan as it was putting together a draft postal reform bill. The president's remarks were, for the most part, well received during the hearing by Democratic and Republican committee members alike—including Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-UT). On July 11, the House formally introduced its reform bill, the Postal Service Reform Act (H.R. 5714), which, although flawed, embraces many of NALC's ideas for reform. (See the President's Message on page 1.)

But all of the goodwill that letter carriers have generated toward themselves and the Postal Service could be history and for naught come January, should adversarial political forces with little interest in either take control in Washington.

### **Service and support**

Similar consideration goes for issues such as the frequency and nature of mail delivery. In 1983, Congress adopted an appropriations rider that required USPS to deliver mail six days a week. This generally non-controversial provision has been included in every appropriations measure since. It's worth noting that in 2014, keeping the rider in place turned into a bit of a battle, thanks to Rep. Darrell Issa's (R-CA) ultimately unsuccessful effort to eliminate it.

Meanwhile, nearly 40 million residential and business customers throughout the country receive packages, letters, bills, medications, supplies and more through direct door-delivery service—where a letter carrier delivers the item right to the customer's door. This component of our invaluable universal delivery network is not only attractive to businesses, it's also a feature of mail delivery that customers prefer—one that has the added advantage of allowing letter carriers to be the eyes and ears of the communities we serve.

In the House, a bipartisan majority has signed onto a resolution that calls for the Postal Service to do what it can to maintain six-day delivery, while nearly 200 House members from both parties (at press time) had co-sponsored a separate resolution supporting door-delivery of the mail. Although these resolutions are not binding and lack the force of law carried by actual bills, they do put House members'

support for them on the record—a fact that letter carrier activists can point to should either service be threatened by legislation that moves to reduce or eliminate them.

In fact, we've done that repeatedly in recent years. NALC helped fend off more than a dozen attempts to end six-day delivery between 2010 and 2014, including the fight with Rep. Issa mentioned above. Doing so saved tens of thousands of letter carrier jobs and prevented the eventual deregulation of the Postal Service—which would likely happen if private competitors emerged to provide Saturday service.

The door delivery resolution is helping us right now to battle attempts to reduce or phase out door delivery service—a move that would cripple the Postal Service's position in the e-commerce market and undermine the value of direct mail.

Getting postal-friendly majorities elected to the House and Senate can go a long way toward alleviating some of the concern that letter carrier activists feel every time some piece of postal legislation comes up for consideration—another very good reason why NALC asks members to think of their employer and their jobs as they cast ballots for federal candidates.

### **Who's the boss?**

Postal governance is another area where it's crucial to have in power a Congress and a president interested in the Postal Service's continued well-being. Whom we elect to the White House and to the Senate makes a huge difference in the quality and backgrounds of the men and women chosen to serve on the Postal Service Board of Governors and the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC). In both bodies, we need individuals who strongly support the mission of the

# DECISION 2016

Postal Service to provide high-quality, universal and affordable services to the American people.

Presently, there is a crucial vacancy on the PRC, and because of the current, historic dysfunction of this particular Congress, it's unlikely that President Obama will be able to nominate anyone to fill that vacancy before he leaves the White House—much less have that nominee be considered and approved. This vacancy leaves an even number of commissioners in place at the PRC, raising the potential for deadlocks.

Worse, the terms of two of the remaining PRC members will expire in October. If it weren't for the fact that commissioners can serve one "hold-over" year while replacements are found, the PRC would not have the quorum needed, come October, to conduct its business. This is especially troubling given that next year, the PRC must undertake a mandated review of the rate-setting process, a review that could prove crucial to the agency's long-term viability.

Meanwhile, there are still *eight* vacancies on the 11-member Postal Board of Governors. In late 2014, before the board lost its quorum, it delegated its power to a "temporary emergency committee" made up of the remaining members, who are now Postmaster General Megan Brennan and Deputy PMG Ronald Stroman (both non-voting members by virtue of their USPS positions), plus the sole remaining appointed member, James Bilbray, who is serving in his hold-over year. Once Bilbray's term ends in December, the board could cease to function.

In contrast with the situation at the PRC, however, there are currently six nominations to the Board of Governors awaiting Senate consideration. In some cases, we support some senators' blocking of poor nominees, such as

former board member James Miller III, who champions contracting out and privatization. But, in other cases, good nominees also are blocked. In any case, these nominations sit alongside the close to 200 other presidential picks for vacant executive-branch positions that are being actively blocked by the Senate.

If nothing changes by the end of this 114th Congress, the entire nomination process must begin again from scratch. That means the results of this election will be especially important to letter carriers—the candidate who wins the White House will be the one to nominate our entire Board of Governors.

## Supreme consideration

The fact that the Senate refuses to even hold a confirmation hearing on Obama's nominee to fill a vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court could have far-reaching implications on issues important to the larger labor movement, of which letter carriers and the NALC are an important part.

Evidence of this particular threat was on full display in March, when the Supreme Court deadlocked 4-to-4 on a case that had the potential to damage public-sector unions' ability to collect fees from employees who choose not to become members. A ruling that went against unions seemed likely—until, in February, conservative Justice Antonin Scalia died, leaving the court with an even number of members.

With power in the Supreme Court balanced between the court's traditionally conservative and liberal factions, further deadlocks down the road remain a real possibility until a ninth justice gets approved. It should come as no surprise, though, that that's unlikely to happen any time

soon. Partisan bickering has kept the Senate from even holding a confirmation hearing on Obama's nominee, U.S. Appeals Court Judge Merrick Garland, much less voting on Garland's nomination.

"All of these considerations on their own should be more than enough to worry letter carriers as Election Day draws closer," President Rolando said. "Most importantly, we should be concerned with the possibility of threats to the rights and benefits we've worked so hard to gain.

"What Congress grants, Congress can also take away," Rolando said. "And depending on who occupies the Oval Office, a signature—or a veto—can be all that stands between us and our right to bargain collectively for our pay, benefits and working conditions."

The president stressed that when it comes to candidates for political office, NALC assesses and makes endorsements based on where they stand on workplace considerations, regardless of their political affiliations: "We ask all of them, do you support letter carriers, USPS and the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively? If the answer is 'yes,' then that answer is what makes them worthy of this union's support."

The fact that, for many NALC members, workplace issues take a back seat to other considerations is something NALC respects, Rolando said.

"The right to decide what matters most to us on a personal level is part of what makes this country great," the president said. "But if the Postal Service, your job and your family's well-being are important to you, then we ask you to give them serious consideration and to weigh them appropriately as you make your election decisions." **PR**