

A changed political landscape requires a new strategy



Fredric V. Rolando

Congress returned in January to a transformed capital city. The Trump administration has arrived; the Obama administration has departed. But this is no ordinary transition. We don't just have a new president; we've entered a period of one-party control of the federal government.

For the past six years, one party controlled Congress and the other controlled the White House. Frustratingly, that caused gridlock on many important issues. But it also gave us some leverage to block bad ideas, no matter which side launched them; ideas such as ending Saturday delivery or raising federal employee payroll contributions for pension contributions. Now that the Republican Party controls both elected branches of government, some of that leverage is gone. That will be especially challenging later this year when Congress turns its attention to budget issues.

Fortunately, the first issue we face is postal reform legislation, where there is strong bipartisan support for our core goals. Our focus, our strategy and our tactics will have to change to reflect this new political landscape, but our goals have not changed one iota.

In February, I testified before a hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on postal reform. The committee's leaders have introduced two bills—H.R. 756 (the Postal Reform Act of 2017) and H.R. 760 (the Postal Service Financial Improvement Act of 2017). I used my testimony to outline NALC's priorities and to provide suggested improvements to the bills, which may be marked up later this month. (A mark-up is a committee meeting where members can amend, delete or add provisions to bills under consideration.)

We urged the committee's members to pass the two bills out of the committee because they contain the essential elements needed to achieve our two core goals for postal reform: 1) a workable resolution of the retiree health pre-funding burden, achieved by maximizing participation in the Medicare program and investing the Retiree Health Fund more sensibly; and 2) a partial restoration of the exigent postage rate increase that expired last year, to provide USPS with the revenues needed to stabilize its finances as the Postal Regulatory Commission conducts its 10-year review of the rate-setting system for market-dominant products.

Addressing these two core goals now is essential. The Postal Service is operating without the exigent increase and has been

operating without borrowing authority for years. Without change, the only near-term solution is a huge rate increase from the PRC review that would hurt everybody—citizens, mailers and employees. And without progress on reform, it is clear that the sentiment that the Postal Service is somehow heading toward a financial crash or a possible taxpayer bailout will grow on the committee, as we heard from the questions and comments at the hearing. If we do not remove the pre-funding burden or bolster the Postal Service's revenues, we will invite continued unwarranted attacks on postal employees and the Postal Service's networks. Advancing the legislation should help us rebuff such attacks.

It is our hope that the committee will merge H.R. 756 and H.R. 760. But that would just be the first step in a long process. Assuming H.R. 756 is approved by the committee, with or without our suggested changes, it would next be referred to the Congressional Budget Office for a review of its effect on the federal budget (a review known as "scoring"). The legislation also would be sent to the two House committees that share jurisdiction over the Medicare program—the Ways and Means Committee for the bill's provisions involving Medicare Parts A and B, and the Energy and Commerce Committee for the legislation's Medicare prescription drug provisions. Once all the committees have their say, the bill could then go to the floor of the House for debate, amendments and a final vote. Meanwhile, a similar process would have to take place in the Senate.

At each stage of the process, we will assess the bill and measure our progress toward achieving our goals. At this early stage, we can support advancing H.R. 756 and H.R. 760 through the Oversight Committee. Our intention is to work with our coalition of unions and mailers to keep the process going and to make improvements along the way. Our ultimate objective is to achieve the two core goals described above while protecting our jobs, our rights, our networks (including door delivery and Saturday delivery) and the interests of all annuitants relative to the bill's Medicare provisions.

Even before work is done on postal reform, we may face other legislative challenges. Most likely, there will be battles over the federal budget and attacks on our pensions and health benefits. This year, NALC has taken on the chairmanship of the Federal Postal Coalition, an association of federal employee organizations, to help lead the resistance to these attacks.

On both postal reform and federal employee issues, we will need an army of letter carrier activists to help make our voices heard. Download the NALC Member App for your smartphone today, if you haven't already. And be ready to rally to our common cause.

Our goals and objectives have not changed. How we reach them has—and must.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fredric Rolando".