

# Rural service declines as USPS builds urban strategy

## Multiple incidents show declines

As postal processing plants close and are merged from smaller regional Sectional Center Facilities into much larger urban plants, newspapers and other small businesses trying to use the mail often find themselves caught up in problems associated with the changing mail infrastructure.

Topping the list is getting timely mail delivery, whether Periodicals, Standard or First Class Mail used by many businesses, including newspapers, to get their bills out on a timely basis and remittances back from subscribers and other customers.

### POSTAL TIPS



MAX HEATH

A second major problem is the "brain drain" within the U.S.

Postal Service, as veterans with knowledge of mail acceptance and rules, especially Periodicals, a complex class, retire and people move up with much less knowledge and experience.

Thirdly, there is a decline in customer service as postmasters and clerks with whom mailers, especially newspapers, have had a long-standing relationship, retire or move on. All too often, people are afraid to make a customer-friendly decision that they lack the experience to make, and their supervisors higher up are often equally untrained.

SOX, or Sarbanes-Oxley, a law used to enforce financial changes in the wake of Enron in the '90s, remains a big bugaboo for many mailers. USPS has gone overboard in applying it to everything possible, it seems.

Many are the injustices perpetrated upon mailers by people who are either scared of their supervisor or lack knowledge of the matter at hand, so "SOX" is cited as the reason not to do something that may well be perfectly proper under the rules.

Often, a militaristic management style is asserted within USPS. (They have a postmaster general, after all, as head.) The Postal Service is rife with stories of maltreatment of employees and contractors that are often reported at [www.postalnews.com](http://www.postalnews.com).

### EXAMPLES OF RECENT POSTAL PROBLEMS

1. The customers of Webster County Water District at Dixon, KY, experienced more than \$3,300 in late charges because of delay of water bills after mail processing moved to Evansville, IN, reported the Journal-Enterprise in nearby Providence. Late/shutoff notices were generated after many of its 2,000 customers didn't get their first notice, sent First-Class, in time to pay it. Over time, customers trickled in with the original bills. "Many of them crumpled, dirty and damaged," reported Matt Hughes, news editor. "Others that were supposed to be delivered to



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customers here in the county had been postmarked in places as far away as Texas."

The problem was blamed on jams in a letter-sorting machine. "We were told by the post office in Evansville that the machines were new, the bags were too tight and that our bills were different from everybody else's," said Water District Superintendent Kevin Lashbrook. "They aren't different. They are just like everybody else sends out." The district wrote off the late fees, including \$2,600 to one customer, a coal mine.

2. Post offices around the country have reported via the National Newspaper Association members that their postmasters tell them that mail delivery is delayed to local carriers because trucks from the more distant SCF—after plant consolidations—often do not arrive on time. That indicates to NNA that the so-called "receiving plant," which has begun receiving mail from multiple smaller plants to process, often cannot handle the extra workload, despite "studies" supposedly done under Area Mail Processing consolidation guidelines indicating the urban plant could handle much greater volume efficiently.

When I talk to personnel at plants across the country that I deal with on behalf of NNA members and my former employer, Landmark Community Newspapers, I often hear that their work hours have been cut back and that their "casual" workers—those lacking full employee status—haven't been trained in how to handle mail properly. Many of the plants have helpful staff, but those people are often tied up many, many hours on multiple USPS telecons or training sessions. (We certainly can't criticize any time spent in training, although it is not clear if the training is getting pushed down to the work-room floor.)

3. The Prairie Pioneer in Pollock, ND, encountered difficulty the second week

of December on an important pre-Christmas issue. But Co-Publisher Allan Burkes tells his story so well I want to quote his e-mail, lightly edited:

"Our two weeklies are printed in Garrison, ND. Our Linton, ND, paper is in the same 3-digit area, and, by default, our Pollock, SD, paper is now in the same area since the Moberge plant was merged into Bismarck a couple of years ago. Postage is the same to mail an out-of-county container of newspapers in Linton, Garrison or Bismarck and, in some cases, Pollock.

"Our printer in Garrison (135 miles away) had problems printing our Pollock newspaper. So it was later than normal and missed the printer's delivery truck that usually brings both the Linton and Pollock trade area and in-county papers to Linton, where we stuff inserts, etc. So, later in the morning, I met a second driver in Bismarck, picked up the Pollock paper and brought it to Linton to be stuffed and mailed. We alerted the three postmasters affected, and everything worked out well to that point.

"One disaster led to another, and three containers with papers for Pollock and Linton that one of the printer's drivers normally

drop off in Steele, ND, through Exceptional Dispatch, missed that truck and ended up coming to Linton with the papers I picked up in Bismarck.

"We attempted to mail the three containers in Linton. The Linton Postmaster, after consultation with the Sioux Falls office, refused to accept the containers. So, we had to pay \$28 First Class postage to ship to the Garrison Post Office (where we pay most of our postage and had already paid for both newspapers). Consequently, our subscribers got papers they normally get on Wednesday on Saturday or Monday. It was our Christmas edition, the largest edition of the year.

"Here is what mystifies me. The postage is the same whether they are mailed in Garrison, Linton or Steele. It's revenue neutral. Why couldn't the Linton Postmaster accept the containers (three) and put them in the mail stream from Linton?

"Please realize that we are paying the printer's driver to deliver the papers to Steele every week only because the USPS cannot get the papers to subscribers in less than two or three days, thanks to the consolidations in the past two or three years.

"I'm so old that I can remember when the local postmaster had some authority to make decisions. All of them in our area, while wonderful, dedicated people, seem to live in fear of the bureaucracy. That was not the case in the not-so-distant past."

Footnote: Although he was apologized to later for the mishandling, Burkes still paid the \$28 postage. © Max Heath 2015

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