

End of Saturday mail

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Moderated by Tom Sabulis

Two views of the post office. One writer says unreasonable union demands have contributed to the decline of the post office, manifested this week in the announcement that Saturday mail delivery will end. In our second piece, a local resident (not related to the other columnist, also named Berman) laments the disappearance of the written word encased in that wrinkled envelope that may have traveled halfway around the world.

Unions to blame for post office cuts
By Richard Berman

Come rain, snow, sleet or hail, the postal service will deliver the mail — unless it's Saturday.

The United States Postal Service's announcement that it will no longer deliver mail on Saturdays is no surprise to those familiar with the organization's decades-long tumultuous relationship with its unions.

Those unions are furious over the ailing organization's decision. The president of the American Postal Workers Union, Cliff Guffey, says that his union "condemns" the decision and claims that the Postal Service's decision "will only deepen the agency's congressionally manufactured financial crisis."

Strong words — and false ones, too. Instead, Guffey should recognize that his union's years of demands have contributed to driving the postal service off its own fiscal cliff.

In short: Though the Postal Service has a congressionally mandated monopoly on delivering First Class mail, its unwieldy union contracts keep the USPS from properly adapting to the marketplace.

All told, employee compensation and benefits account for roughly 80 percent of USPS' costs. A 2010 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) notes that this "percentage ... has remained similar over the years despite major advances in technology and the automation of postal operations."

In terms of salary and benefits, union officials have been able to milk the USPS dry. The Cato Institute says that the average employee receives \$83,000 in total compensation per year. Elsewhere, the GAO report states that the USPS pays a higher percentage of health care costs than other federal agencies — agencies that are already renowned for being much more generous than the private sector.

These contracts also limit what percentage of the workforce can be part-time or contracted. Postal unions have ensured that if the USPS is going to hire someone, they're almost assuredly going to be a full-time, permanent, and union dues-paying employee.

But the Postal Service doesn't necessarily need so many full-time workers. In 2009, the Federal Times reported that the USPS averages 45,000 hours of "standby time" every week, when employees sit idle, costing the USPS more than \$50 million a year.

Some of this idleness can be chalked up to the collective bargaining agreements that limit employee reassignments. This leaves the Postal Service grossly inefficient — and often leaves you waiting in a long line while employees, following union rules, sit idle.

At the end of the day, there's surprisingly little that the post office can do to change this ailing and failing system. In the rare instances when the USPS and unions seek a neutral third-party to help renegotiate union contracts, the arbitration negotiator is not legally obligated to consider the postal service's financial situation. The result? New union contracts, same old financial problems.

The American people generally understand the rules of the business world: If you lose money, something needs to change, or you'll go bankrupt. That's probably why a recent New York Times poll found that 70 percent of Americans support the U.S. Postal Service's decision to end Saturday delivery.

If the postal union leadership ever gets that message, it will probably have been delivered overnight by FedEx.

Richard Berman is executive director of the Center for Union Facts, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit whose website states it is "dedicated to showing Americans the truth about today's union leadership."

By Sean Berman

I am a 28-year-old Generation Y'er who grew up during the digital age. I had my first computer when I was 13. I had my first email address in 1999. I have had AOL, NetZero, Juno, Comcast and Gmail. I am a regular user of my desktop, laptop and tablet, and I am completely reliant on my Blackberry. Through all this, my favorite form of communication is the written word. I write and receive letters on a regular basis, and when I am out of town, I get immense joy from sending a post card.

There is something to be said about the feeling I get when I drop a letter in the mail. There is a rush that goes along with opening the mailbox after a long day of work and seeing there is a hand-written envelope addressed to me, and it doesn't include something with a due date. Sitting at my kitchen table reading a letter, holding it in my hand, is a way to escape my electronic dependence for a short period and experience the purist form of communication.

The sensation I get when I write a letter and then anticipate its delivery across the country is one I cannot get from anywhere else. The instant gratification which I am used to is gone, and I am transported to a place where part of the reward is awaiting the response. It may take three to four weeks to receive one, but every time I look in my mailbox, I know there is the possibility of it being there, and that short bit of excitement is worth the wait.

It costs 46 cents to send a first-class letter anywhere in the United States. It is not surprising the post office does not make any money. That is remarkably cheap. The USPS Inspector General reported in 2011, the Postal Service delivered more than 6 billion pieces of standard flat mail. — and recouped only 79.5 percent of the cost of standard mail. That is a losing equation. It is an unsustainable and an unacceptable practice. Something has to be done.

I do not know the answers. Stopping Saturday delivery is a start. The price of a stamp certainly needs to increase by more than a penny a year. Greater steps need to be taken to ensure the Postal Service is around for future generations. It has connected distant lovers, close friends and family when other options were not available. It has allowed soldiers to receive packages from loved ones who wait for and miss them. From the Civil War to the War in Afghanistan, it has been there to connect people in good times and in bad.

I would like future Americans to know the joy of looking in the mailbox after a long day of work and being able to experience the excitement of seeing a hand-written envelope addressed to them.