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## Motives in saving postal facility doubted

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Politics played a part in the U.S. Postal Service's about-face on the proposed closure of Delaware's mail-processing facility near New Castle, Washington observers and two U.S. senators said Thursday.

Maryland Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski and Ben Cardin moved swiftly Thursday to blast the agency's new plan to study the cost savings of sending mail from the Eastern Shore to the Hares Corner plant on Quigley Boulevard for processing. About 125 postal jobs in Easton, Md., are at stake.

In a letter to Postmaster General Patrick A. Donahoe, they attributed the change to "undue political influence."

Delaware's congressional delegation last month pitched the Eastern Shore-to-Delaware option to postal officials as an alternative to closing Hares Corner.

"There is absolutely no statistical or empirical data to justify consideration of this idea," Cardin and Mikulski wrote.

Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., said presenting the facts to top agency leaders helped Delaware's case on Hares Corner -- not asking for political favors.

"We've continued to press our case in writing and on the phone with the postmaster general, deputy postmaster general and several of the Board of Governors," said Carper, who chairs the Senate subcommittee overseeing the Postal Service.

"We've worked with a whole broad section of people, employees, leaders of the postal service and other elected officials to say, 'Does this proposal make good sense?' We explained to the Postal Service why we think it does not."

Carper compared the effort to the successful appeal by Delaware politicians several years ago to prevent the elimination of a portion of Delaware's Air National Guard facility by the base-realignment commission in Washington.

"We sought to reproduce that effort here," he said.

To the relief of its 500 employees, the Hares Corner plant is not among 223 processing facilities designated for closure or consolidation this week as part of the Postal Service's three-year, \$15 billion cost-savings plan. The agency anticipates the loss of 30,000 full-time and 5,000 noncareer positions nationwide after May 15.

Donahoe told The Washington Post on Thursday his advisers spent months studying the feasibility of shuttering the sites by reviewing network-delivery models. The study determined that six sites -- including Easton, Md. -- would require further review.

Consolidation plans remain very fluid, Donahoe said.

Last month during a public meeting in New Castle, regional officials said shuttering Hares Corner would save an estimated \$19.7 million a year and eliminate about 200 jobs.

On Thursday, the agency reversed course. After a five-month study, the postal service found "no significant opportunity to improve efficiency or service" through the consolidation of Hares Corner into Bellmawr, N.J., spokesman Ray Daiutolo Sr. said. "No changes will be made at this time."

Daiutolo would not detail what altered officials' thinking within the last month.

Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst with the Libertarian **Cato Institute**, couldn't imagine that officials divorced Carper's appeal from his role seeking postal reform in the U.S. Senate.

"You have certain members responsible for moving legislation through committees and to the floor. If you're the post office, you really don't want to upset these people too much," said DeHaven, who lives in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and previously worked for a Senate subcommittee on government reform and oversight.

"You close Wilmington, and maybe it puts more pressure on Tom Carper to do something. I'm sure they calculated that wouldn't get them anywhere. So they feel playing ball with Carper will," he said.

DeHaven compared the situation to politicians objecting to a military base closing or an Amtrak route's suspension affecting voters in their home district.

Leaders in Delaware had argued the loss of Hares Corner -- the state's only such facility -- would put Delaware at a competitive disadvantage for retaining and attracting businesses. WSFS, JPMorgan Chase, the IRS and other institutions worried about delays in processing time-sensitive information.

The economic downturn and the public's transition to electronic communication have contributed to the postal service's financial woes. Despite slashing costs and reducing its workforce, leaders face a budget drained annually by a \$5.5 billion payment into a mandatory fund for retiree health benefits.

Along with closing facilities, the service has proposed eliminating Saturday service, slowing mail delivery and cutting more jobs. Carper and a bipartisan group of lawmakers have introduced legislation to help the Postal Service address financial problems. Some say it doesn't go far enough.

"No amount of job cuts, delivery changes or cutting of mail-processing plants or shifting of costs onto employees will make up for that \$5 billion payment each year," said Sally Davidow of the American Postal Workers Union. "Congress has to fix that."

A decision on the Easton alternative could take three to five months, agency spokeswoman Yvette Singh in Baltimore said. Easton's facility had been slated for closure and consolidation with Baltimore's.

Talbot County Councilwoman Laura Price of Easton and other Maryland politicians had urged the postal service to reconsider, noting the inevitable expense and delays posed by trucking shore mail across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Price is now making a similar argument against the shift to Delaware.

Staff reporter Nicole Gaudiano contributed to this story.

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