

from our viewpoint...

Postal Service issue ain't over till it's over

While we're thrilled the Senate has finally gotten its act together and passed the 21st Century Postal Service Bill, the crisis facing the service is far from over.

We at *The Goodland Star-News* watch what happens with the Postal Service very closely, as we are one of their biggest customers in northwest Kansas. Our company, which includes six area papers, sends out about 20,000 newspapers a week through the mail. Add to that any first class mail we send, and that's a lot of business we do through the post office.

We've watched, and spoken out, as the service has moved to cut post offices in Kanorado and Edson, moved mail processing out of Colby and threatened to move it again. We were also aghast that they would consider going to a 2-3 day standard for delivery. We're in the business on keeping people up to date, and delays make our product less relevant.

So we've been understandably interested in the Senate debate on the Postal Service Bill, and it's good to see progress being made, even if it took so long to get there. But that progress doesn't mean the issue has been put to bed.

For one thing, the measure has to pass the House of Representatives, which has a different majority party, and a far more members who are likely itching to add their own ideas to what is already a mammoth bill. Don't look for this to go to the president for signature or veto any time soon, despite the Postal Service's May 15 deadline. CNN Money is reporting the service itself and some in the House are dissatisfied with the Senate bill. They don't like all the road blocks put that prevent the service from making cuts.

This likely means the Edson and Kanorado offices haven't been saved, nor has the planned moving of our mail processing to North Platte, Neb., been averted since this is a major sticking point. The Senate bill would commit the service to providing next-day service, which would save us from at least some of the cuts to local facilities, but will the Senate stick up for these road blocks if it comes to a showdown between it and the House? There's no way to know.

The bill also allows the Postal Service to borrow even more money from the U.S. Treasury. People often say the service doesn't use tax dollars, but that's not strictly true since it borrows \$12 billion from the Treasury. The bill would allow it to borrow up to \$26 billion.

Now, there are plenty of good things in this bill, such as eliminating the requirement that the Postal Service pre-fund health care benefits for retirees, one of the main reasons for the service's financial troubles.

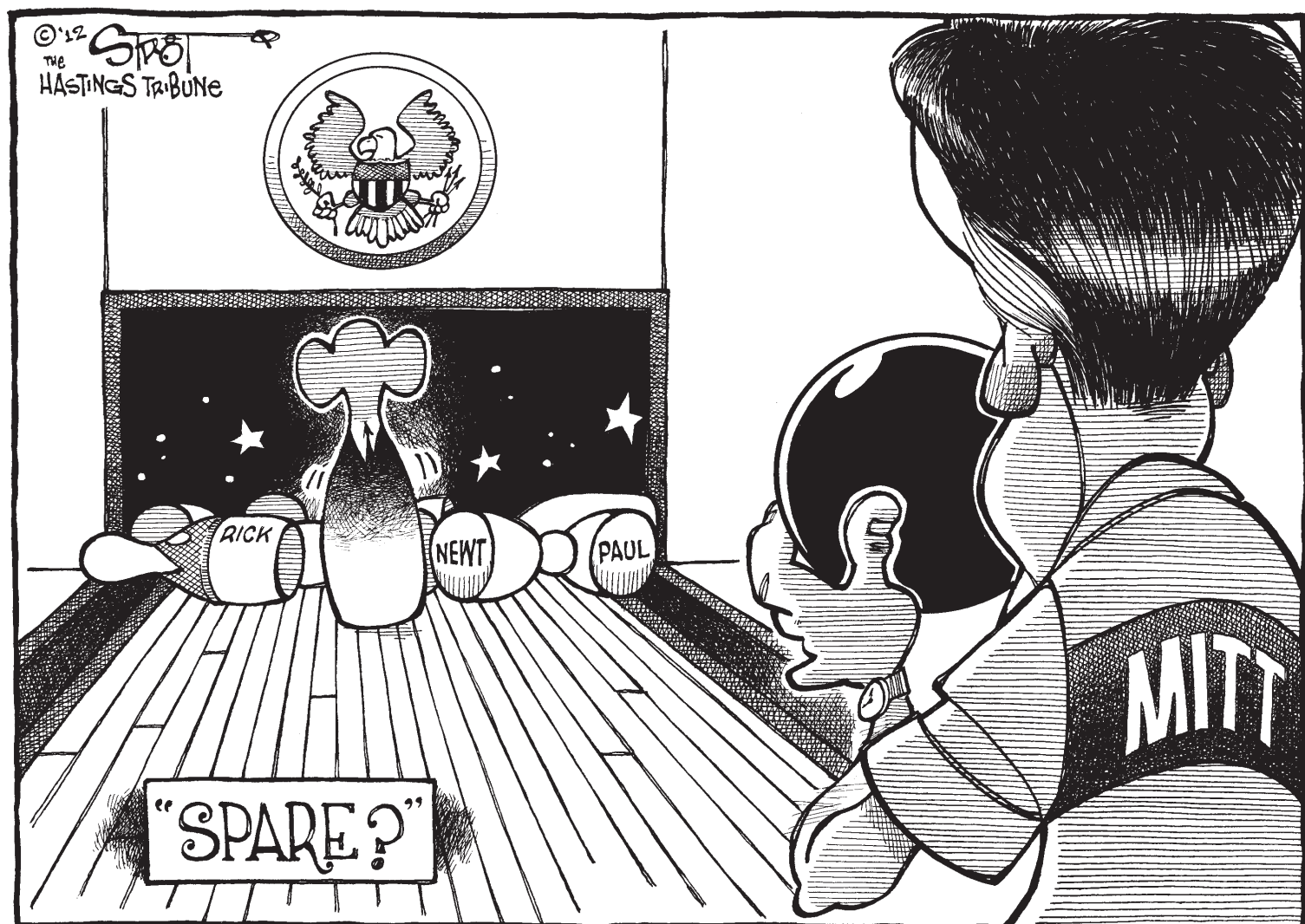
There's also the Amendment by Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), which requires the service to look at local impact before making changes.

We can't tell you how many times that subject has come up at the service's public meetings around here. Concerned citizens have asked Postal Service representatives repeatedly whether they have considered how closing a post office will affect local economies. They always say no. Maybe now they'll have to.

It also delays getting rid of Saturday mail for two years and caps executive pay.

If the House doesn't come through, the Postal Service is going to go forward with all the draconian cuts they've been threatening. Without a doubt it will mean the closure of the Edson and Kanorado post offices and our mail process will move out of Kansas.

We hope the House will get something done quickly, but we're not going to hold our breath. —Kevin Bottrell



Watching live Senate debate was interesting

One of the advantages of semi-retirement is the ability to take time to follow specific events effecting the future of our country.

Tuesday and Wednesday I spent the afternoons watching the U.S. Senate work through the amendments and give final approval to the 21st Century Postal Service reform bill. The final vote Wednesday afternoon was 62-37, with 60 votes required to pass the bill.

Whether the changes included in the postal bill will help save the Postal Service from financial collapse will have to wait to see what the U.S. House does when it is their turn to handle the legislation.

The Senate bill was developed in September when the Postal Service announced plans to close about 3,700 post offices and up to 200 processing centers. The Postmaster General said the service would delay any closing plans until May 15, putting pressure on Congress to find a way to approve changes.

From the beginning in September the bill has been a bipartisan effort through Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut as the co-sponsors. Kansas Sen. Jerry Moran was part of the committee drafting the bill, and worked on several of the amendments presented in the two days.

Watching the senators working on the floor and coming in for each vote reminded me of many years ago when I watched a similar process in 1972 watching the Senate debate the War Powers Act in person. It was a bit easier watching on CSPAN2, because I was able to do other things around the house while waiting for the roll call votes to be concluded taking at least 10 minutes each time.

While in college at the University of Colorado at Boulder I had an opportunity to follow the



tom betz

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legislative process as part of an independent study for my Political Science degree. I spent time in Denver to watch and write about the Colorado Governor and Legislature through the many hoops a bill goes through before becoming a law.

Today the process is like watching your favorite baseball team trying to win a doubleheader. In this case Lieberman and Cousins were the pitcher and catcher handling the senators who had amendments like a constant round of batters. In some cases Lieberman was able to agree to the amendment and it was adopted on voice vote, but other cases the amendment was not accepted and the batting senator wanted a roll call vote. Some batting order changes occurred with some amendments being withdrawn and others being shifted when the Senator was not present on the floor.

Prior agreements on the number of amendments and the debate on each made the process move fairly quickly as the proponent and opponent of each amendment were given one minute to make their case before the vote was taken. In those cases where Lieberman or Cousins could they agreed with the amendment and asked that it be approved on a voice vote. Other amendments were opposed and went to roll call votes.

On the surface some of the proposed amendments seemed germane and could easily be

adopted. Others such as a couple proposed by Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky were apparently designed to test the bipartisan coalition. On more than one of the amendments the voting was pretty much on a partisan basis, but because the rules required 60 votes the amendments failed. Several of Paul's amendments were adopted including one to reduce the number of House and Senate post offices to one for each house. On his amendment to eliminate collective bargaining Sen. Paul asked for it to be accepted on a voice vote, but Sen. Lieberman asked for a roll call vote.

Sen. Moran voted to approve the final bill, but on some amendments he followed the party line. One amendment left one wondering as Moran and Sen. Pat Roberts voted in favor of an amendment to require postal employees to retire when they were age-eligible. The amendment failed on a party line vote, but left one wondering if Moran really feels people should be required to retire when they are age-eligible.

On the Paul amendment trying to eliminate collective bargaining for postal employees both Roberts and Moran voted against. The amendment went down on a 23-76 vote.

What the future brings for the post office remains uncertain, but the Senate bill would delay any post office closings or process center consolidation for at least one year.

It will be interesting to see the House action, however, a trip to the Rotary International Convention in May in Thailand could make it tough to watch.

I keep getting asked if I enjoy retirement and if I am too bored. So far it has not slowed down enough to be bored. —Tom Betz

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Adventures with 2-year-olds

On the last day of April 2002, son Ben, Dinnie Wooster (our Sheltie) and I went for a walk. Not too long into the journey, I spied some dandelions in a deserted lot on the east side of the street.

These weren't just any old dandy lions as my then 2 1/2 year old pronounced the word but rather perfectly shaped white fluff balls just waiting to be blown of their stems.

I reached down and picked a couple and told Ben to watch as I placed the dandelion a few inches from my mouth. I gave a stiff blow and the miniature parachutes flew in a southerly direction with the prevailing wind.

Watching them drift through the air, my young boy danced with glee.

"Let me do it Daddy," he pleaded.

I picked a couple more and held them up for him to blow. He didn't get the hang of it right away and had difficulty blowing them off the stem.

That's when I spied a small stick, walked over, grabbed it and proceeded to practice my infamous golf stroke using the dandy lion head as a golf ball.

Ben saw this and raised his jig one notch higher anticipating the fun he would soon have "bamm" these dandy lion heads.

"Give me the stick, Daddy," he demanded.

Once in his tiny mitts, he proceeded to strike the planet. That's right he hit the dirt, rocks, grass and almost everything on the ground before he finally connected with the dandy lion head. When he finally perfected his aim these white-headed victims were in danger of being wiped from the lot.

But then tragedy struck.

Ben threw down his small, 2-foot branch and announced it was too small and that he needed a BIG stick. Teddy Roosevelt would have been proud although the former U.S. president would have had to work hard on the part about, "speaking softly" with my son.

Next, Ben proceeded to beat his feet like a drum, flail his arms in the air and scream for a



Insight this week

• john schlageck

bigger stick. What man hasn't—at one time in his life—cried out for a bigger stick?

Sorry, I'm regressing.

When a two-and-a-half year old wants something—he wants it yesterday. Ben expected me to produce a big stick and do it now.

While I'm not a magician, he sometimes expects me to produce television shows, cookies, chips, sticks, just about anything and everything upon demand.

I quietly explained to him that we would have to look for a bigger stick. The emphasis was on the two words, WE and LOOK.

There was no way Daddy was going to search for a stick while his son remained rooted to the ground while screaming at the top of his lungs.

We set out together in quest of the BIG stick. I was prepared for an epic journey through the neighborhood to find the perfect stick. In fact I suggested we go home, have dinner, watch Sponge Bob, sleep for the night, have breakfast—all before we continued our search.

Ben was having nothing to do with any of my suggestions. Being twice his height, I spotted a stick I knew would do the job and motioned Ben in that direction.

He threw his head down and dashed full speed ahead. When he spied the dandy lion killer, he shouted, "There it is Daddy. A BIG stick."

His little mind outran his feet and before he could stop and pick up the stick he tripped and launched himself head first.

Not to worry. He never said a word, picked up the stick and proceeded to stand up and looked about for the dreaded dandy lions he

was about to slay with his new BIG stick. His smile stretched from ear to ear as he waved the weapon several times over his head while giving his best Tarzan ape call - no, just kidding. He'll receive lessons in that later.

When he finally found the first dandy lion, he proceeded to club it into the ground. He didn't give up until the plant was undistinguishable from the black soil. The smile never left his face.

After he'd performed his own childlike version of a scorched earth expedition on the hapless dandy lions, he puffed out his chest a bit more and proceeded to drag his war club at his side, looking a bit like B.C. in the Johnny Hart comic strip.

He wasn't giving this weapon up for nothing and yelled a resounding, "NO," when I suggested he leave the club for next time. In fact he carried it another quarter mile to our yard where he abandoned it only after his mother announced it was time to eat chicken dinosaurs.

"I will bamm those dandy lions again tomorrow," he announced chucking his wooden club on the ground and trading it for a silver fork.

So it goes in the world of my 2 1/2-year-old bam-bam warrior.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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