



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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New boss pushing big postal cutbacks

Can you imagine a world without mail? Neither can Pat Donahoe, the new postmaster general.

The Post Office was among the first departments, organized by the Continental Congress back in 1775, a year before the Declaration of Independence. It was seen as a vital means of uniting the colonies.

Today, nearly everyone depends on the U.S. Postal Service – but that could change, and quickly.

Pat Donahoe looks a lot like the guy left holding the bag. When he took office Dec. 7 after 10 years as the service's No. 2 guy, the agency has just posted a record \$8.5 billion loss for 2010. Prospects for the future are little brighter.

Mr. Donahoe briefed editors and publishers at the National Newspaper Association's Government Affairs Conference last month, inviting them to his 14th-floor conference room for an hour and a half.

It's not that the service has been standing still while the recession and changes in how people communicate pounded it. The agency has cut nearly a third of its employees – going from 803,000 in 2000 to 553,000 today – he noted. It's slashed overtime, revamped its system and cut at every level, \$19 billion a year in cuts.

"The loss this year will be \$9 billion," he said, "but it could have been \$28 billion."

One of the service's biggest problems is a law requiring it to make \$5.5 billion a year in advance payments to the old civil service retirement system. While government auditors says the payments are no longer needed, Congress has refused to act – even though ending them would solve many of the agency's money problems.

As it is, the service will reach its borrowing limit this year and could run out of cash by next summer, Donahoe said. Already, it's defaulted on some pension payments.

"I tell everyone this," the postmaster general says, "because people need to know. Nobody is going to bail us out."

Mr. Donahoe, a tall guy who looks as Irish as his name, started as a postal clerk in Pittsburgh. Don't let that fool you, though; he has a bachelor's degree in economics from Pitt and a master's from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He gives the impression he's a force of nature, a leader who'll get his program set in motion no matter what.

The question is, is it the right program? And will it be enough to save the venerable mail service?

Donahoe wants to streamline the service's plant and delivery system, on more, realigning mail-sorting, eliminating jobs, cutting out Saturday delivery and closing more than a third of the nation's 33,000 post offices. And that's just the first round. He says all that should save more than \$1 billion, but against a \$9 billion loss, that's not much.

Still, he said, if Congress will act on the pension overpayment, the service should be able to move into the black for the next few years. Even his most optimistic line, however, shows a deficit creeping back in by 2016.

What's wrong?

A lot. For one thing, people don't mail things like they used to. First-class mail is off by 25 percent over the last five years. Individuals and businesses have turned to e-mail and texting to replace letters, bills, paper-check payments and the like.

The future holds more of the same.

For years now, the Postal Service has looked to advertising – what we all junk mail – for growth. Whether that can sustain the goal of universal mail service across the nation, no one knows. Some cuts may drive mail away.

What is certain is the system still has too many workers and, by industry standards, they're highly paid. Postal unions are among the strongest in the nation, and they have heavy influence in Congress.

By 2015, the postmaster general says, the service should be down to 420,000 employees, trimming another quarter of its work force.

Congress is sure to oppose closing rural offices, but in the end, no one wants to be seen as "bailing out" the postal system, so the service is likely to get its way. It'll have to keep cutting and try to generate more business. Some postal unions have pitched in, but not all.

"These aren't scare tactics," Mr. Donahoe says of the cuts, adding that the price of stamps can't go up much more: "I can't price myself out of this."

Resolution to the pension overpayments is nearly impossible, since Congress is counting that money as federal "income" and using it to make the deficit look smaller.

In the topsy-turvy world of Washington, that nearly makes sense, but it'll do no one any good if the Postal Service goes belly up.

Fans get first look at teams

Fans will get their first look at fall sports teams during the annual Decatur Community High Sports Drink Scrimmages and run Thursday, Aug. 25, at the high school.

Again this year, the teams will hold a fund-raising hamburger and hot-dog barbecue beginning at 5 p.m. in City Park, south and west of the high school.

The junior high volleyball scrimmage will start at 4:15 p.m., followed by the junior high football scrimmage at 4:45 p.m. and the high school volleyball scrimmage at 5:15 p.m.

The feature event of the evening, the high school football scrimmage and cross country run, will begin at 7 p.m. at Smick Field south of the high school.

Everyone is invited to enjoy supper in the park and check out the 2011 teams.



PUSHING AROUND A GIANT TIRE during practice on Monday was just one part of strength training for Jeff Juenemann and the rest of the Decatur Community Junior High football team this year.

– Herald photo by Cynthia Haynes

Fall athletes start practice for seasons

With the approach of the school year, Decatur Community High sports teams started practice on Monday.

All junior high and high school teams started practice. The junior high and high school boys hit the practice field for football at 6:30 a.m. and again at 4 p.m., while the girls were in the gym for volleyball practice at 6:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.

The cross country team also started official practice although the members have been hotfooting it around town all summer.

The football players will start practice with pads on Thursday, Athletic Director Joe Dreher said, since state regulations require that the players have three days of practice without pads.

The high school football team will again be led by Coach J.D. Johnson, assisted by Shane Bird and Caleb Howland.

The junior high boys will be coached by Mr. Dreher and teacher Mark Bricker.

Sherri Ruf, who has taken the Oberlin volleyball girls to the state tournament the last three years, will be head coach for the high school girls again this year with Melissa Dreher assisting.

The junior high girls will be coached by Gina Witt and Cricket Ketterl.

Coach Dreher said that the best way for the players to protect themselves from heat-related problems is to drink lots of water and to cut out soda and junk food, which can dehydrate you.

Gatorade is good, he said, but the athletes should drink mostly water, since too much sports drink can cause cramps.

"Water is the most important," he said.

And as the sun beat down and the coaches called exercises and practice moves, the boys needed frequent breaks as they endured their first day on the practice field.

UPCOMING EVENTS in Kansas

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Lawrence Busker Festival
August 19-21, Lawrence
Witness crazy and creative acts, oddities, and performances in Historic Downtown Lawrence. Sword Swallowers, Fire Eaters, Aerial Acts & much more! LawrenceBuskerFest.com

Yoder Heritage Day
August 27, Yoder
Pancake feed, parade, kid's peddle pull, buggy races, quilt auction, children's games, live music, antique tractor pull - AND MORE! yoderkansan.com

115th Annual Labor Day Celebration
September 2-5, Hoisington
Fun events for the entire family. BBQ, kid races, car show & parade. 28th Annual KS State Demo Derby & Dance. (620) 653-4311, hoisingtonkansan.com

Autumn & Art at Bradley Fair
September 16-18, Wichita
A juried visual arts show with artists from across the U.S. Enjoy art from a variety of mediums. Hands-on children's art activities, food & music. (877) 934-3378, autumnandart.com

McPherson Scottish Festival
September 23-25, McPherson
Lakeside Park
Pipes & drums, dance, athletes, clans. (620) 241-8507, macfestival.org

Wagonmasters Chili Cook-Off
September 24, Wichita
Public tasting, hot music and activities. State sanctioned ICS event. Fun for everyone! (316) 264-6005, wagonmasterschili.com

Kansas 150 Festival
October 8, Wichita
The Sunflower State's Biggest Birthday Bash Ever! Kansas Sunflower Parade, historic reenactors, "Home on the Range" concert and more! Find out more at KS150.org

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