

Mail to be sorted in North Platte

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Postal Service officials announced Friday that a plan to close the mail processing operation in Colby has been approved, but with a twist: rather than the area's mail being hauled to Denver for sorting, it'll go to North Platte, Neb.

The closing is part of a nationwide plan to save the struggling agency up to \$2.1 billion a year as it fights to avoid insolvency in the face of \$8 billion to \$10 billion in annual losses.

With Congress considering bills to help the service and a request for an advisory opinion on first-class service standards

pending with the Postal Regulatory Commission, no date has been set for the changes.

In Colby, acting postmaster Joe Welshon said he had not seen anything about the decision, which was announced by regional officials in Denver.

"I haven't got anything official," he said. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens here."

At a public meeting on the proposal here in December, officials said the change would have little effect on operations that customers see, since most of the area's mail now is being taken to Salina to be sorted overnight. Savings from the new plan are

estimated at only about \$14,000 per year.

The service emphasized that mail delivery, counter operations and business mail service would continue as usual, no matter what happens with the mail-sorting "plant."

Colby is one of seven plants in Kansas on the "hit list" for closure. Others are in Hays, Salina, Dodge City, Hutchinson, Liberal and Topeka. Mail sorting for most would be moved to Wichita, but Topeka's would go to Kansas City, Mo., Liberal's to Amarillo, Texas, and Colby's to Nebraska.

As part of the overall plan, the Postal Service hopes to change the standard for delivery of First Class mail from overnight

to three days, depending on distance, to two to three days regardless of distance.

The current system is designed to get mail moved overnight within about 200 miles, said Brian Sperry, a spokesman for the service in Denver. After realignment of the network, he said, the service would plan to deliver mail within three days anywhere in the country. That means a letter to the person next door would go to North Platte for sorting the day after mailing and be delivered by the second or third day.

Mr. Sperry said all the changes are contingent on completion of the Rate Commission case, filed Dec. 5. While the commission's opinion will be advisory only, he said, the

service is required by law to seek it.

"The Postal Service will make the final decision," Mr. Sperry added.

The service had promised Congress it would hold off on any changes until May 15 to give legislators time to consider several bills to ease the agency's financial crisis. Mr. Sperry said the service went ahead with its internal decision-making process because it needed time to get proper notice out to workers under their union contracts.

Why North Platte rather than Denver? At the meeting here in December, citizens pointed out that the service couldn't depend on trucks getting through to Denver day (See LOCAL on Page 8A)



Students at play games

AT THE GRADE SCHOOL on Thursday, students played games in the gym after and before lunch with their "extended learning families," made of of kids from different classes. Jean Soderlund (above) tried to put a paper hat on a paper snowman while blindfolded. Grady Lohofener (left) picked up wads of paper that had been thrown into buckets.

— Herald staff photos by Kimberly Davis

City may not have the money for new runway

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While the Oberlin airport will get a major renovation this summer, removing a hump in the runway and new pavement on the runway, taxiway and apron, it might be a problem for the city to come up with money to pay for the second phase of a proposed modernization project.

During a meeting Thursday, Oberlin Mayor Bill Riedel told the City Council that the city's cost for building a proposed 5,000-foot runway has gone up substantially.

The original proposal, he said, would have cost the city less than \$50,000, but due to increased costs and less money offered by the federal government, the price has shot up.

The federal government has gone from offering a 95 percent match of funds, he said, to a 90 percent match. That makes the city's price tag for the second phase of the airport upgrades way higher.

"We somehow need to figure out how we're going to pay for this," he said.

The plans for the second phase call for the city to start land acquisition for the longer runway, he said, but if the city doesn't have the money, it wouldn't be good to start trying to get the land.

"The city does not generate enough money to pay for this," he said, adding that perhaps the city could borrow the rest using general obligation bonds. However, he noted, airport bonds would require a vote of the people.

Mr. Riedel said that he is worried

that the city won't be able to cover all its cost for the project, noting that the new sewer plant cost about about \$1.2 million, the water projects may cost more than \$5 million and there is talk of a sales tax increase to pay for a new swimming pool.

"And revenues are dropping," he said. "We'll have to make some tough decisions, set priorities and tighten our belts. I'd hate to take a reasonably healthy city and make it not so much."

Mr. Riedel said that the federal government is still willing to pay for most of the airport project, but the city's share has doubled.

"That has doubled our cost on the airport," he said.

Other things that have driven the cost up include increased construction costs and requirements that the airport be brought up to current federal standards, including safety zones near the ends of the runway which require more land.

He noted that the airport has been downgraded by the Federal Aviation Administration from a class C to a class B. That means that it used to be able to accept planes weighing 60,000 pounds and now it can only take those of 30,000 pounds or less. This eliminates most freight deliveries, he said.

Most air ambulances can land on a 2,800-foot runway, Mr. Riedel said. Oberlin is fine on that with its 3,500-foot runway.

Decatur County Hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden said that while the airport is closed, the hospital will just use helicopters, which can land on the parking lot across from the hospital, for most transports.

Health assessment set for Monday

Everyone is invited to a Community Healthcare Needs Assessment from 7 to 8:30 a.m. Monday at the Golden Age Center, sponsored by the Decatur County Hospital and the county Health Department.

Hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden said the "town-hall" group discussion will cover the health care needs of the county. Mrs. Doeden said it's been at least 12 years since an assessment like this has been held here.

A new assessment is required,

she said, for the hospital to retain its nonprofit status with the Internal Revenue Service.

According to a letter the hospital sent out, "This event is being held to identify and prioritize health needs of Decatur County residents, in order to maintain regulatory compliance for both organizations."

Mrs. Doeden said a facilitator from VVV Research and Development Inc. of Olathe will lead the meeting. Coffee and rolls will be served.

Race promoter asks to sell beer at track

An Oberlin racer and promoter asked the Decatur County commissioners for permission to have a beer garden and to allow beer in part of the grandstand for races at the Decatur County Speedway, located at the county fairground.

Rick Salem said he would like to make a go of the track. It's a great asset to the town and produces great revenue, he told the commissioners last Tuesday.

Mr. Salem said to make it work,

he's asking if he could have a beer garden behind the grandstand where they could sell beer and then have part of the grandstand where people could drink beer.

There would be money in the sponsorships and revenue from beer sales, he said.

Mr. Salem asked for the commissioner's support on the idea, adding that he knows there are some zoning issues to work out.

He said he checked into an insurance policy and there is an alcohol liability clause which covers \$2 million for anything related to the races. Mr. Salem said he did have

a call from another insurance company, which offered a \$5 million liability clause.

Commissioner Stan McEvoy said someone had asked him who was going to police or monitor the alcohol.

Mr. Salem said he could have security people and use colored arm bands to show whose ID had been checked. He added if they could have people monitoring in the stands so customers aren't buying for minors. He said he could also talk to the police department.

Do you think this is the difference to make the track viable? asked

Commissioner Gene Gallentine.

Mr. Salem said he thought it will help make the difference. So far, he said, he has three races on the schedule.

If he can work it out with the fair board, he said, he would like to have a memorial race for his father, Bob Salem, on Saturday and Sunday during the fair. Mr. Salem said he would like to get sponsors for that, adding that he thought it would be a good deal for the community.

He said he has already talked with the fair board about the idea. The board, said Mr. Salem, wanted (See REQUEST on Page 8A)

Rural Health tab inside today's paper

Inside today's newspaper, readers will find the Nor'West Newspapers Rural Health special section. This 40-page section features hospitals, health facilities and other information about health care across northwest Kansas. The staffs of *The Oberlin Herald*, *The Saint Francis Herald*, *The Norton Telegram*, the *Colby Free Press*, the *Bird City Times* and *The Goodland Star-News* took part in gathering and presenting information about health care in this part of the state.

