

Opinion

Most everyone depends on U.S. postal service

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 had 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 a session lasting nearly 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, eliminating \$19 billion a year in expenses.

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

Despite all that work, he added, fuel hikes could cost \$400 million this year alone to the operator of the nation's largest truck fleet.

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 actuaries and government auditors say the system is overfunded and 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 to the government.

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

And 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, or MIT. 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 once more, realigning mail-sorting plants, eliminating workers and executives, 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 alike 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 call junk mail – for growth. Whether that can sustain the goal of universal mail service across the nation, no one knows for sure. It's always been First Class Mail that's paid the bills.

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, partly because 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. In small towns where offices close, the agency touts its "Village Post Office" as a replacement. Costs in the first town went from \$89,000 a year, he said, to \$2,000. However, many small towns lack a business or public office which could house a contract station.

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 are on board yet.

"These aren't scare tactics," Mr. Donahoe says of the cuts. "First Class is driving that."

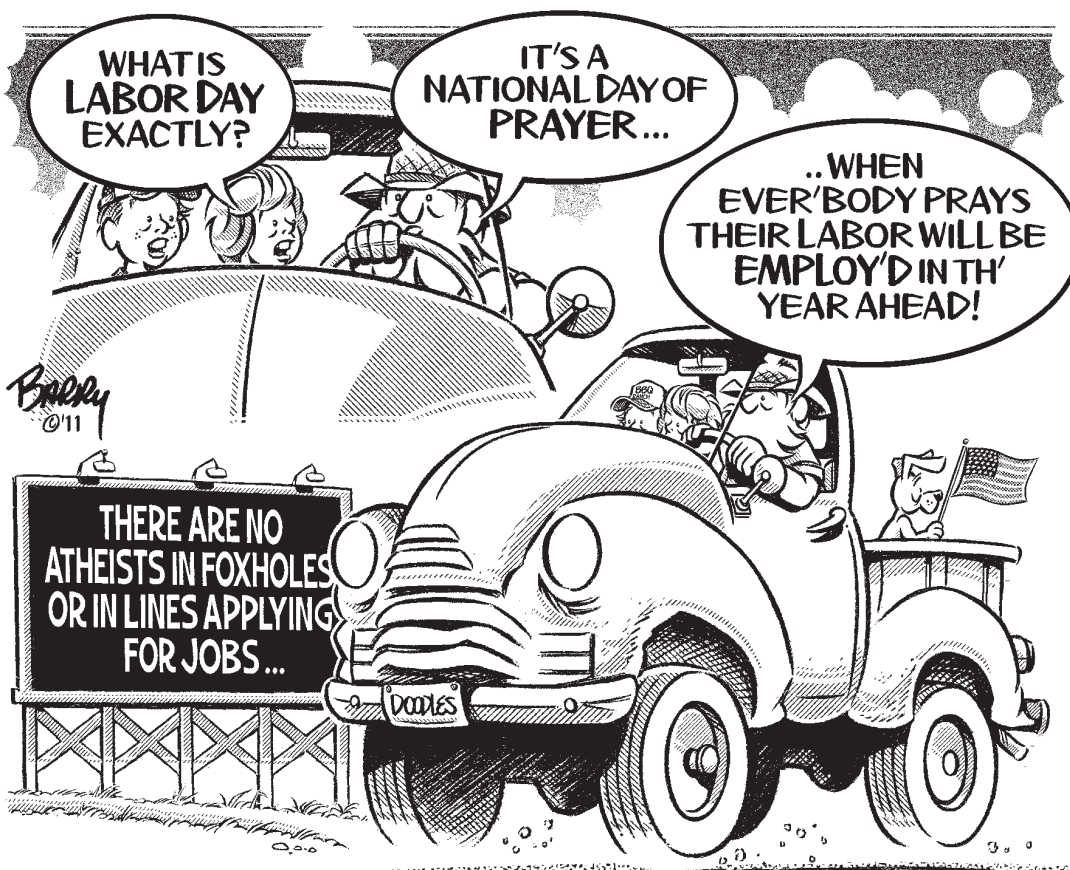
And the price of stamps can't go up much more, he adds.

"I can't price myself out of this," he says.

A fair solution 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. Then Congress will have to bail out one of the government's oldest and best-loved services.

—Steve Haynes



The Gardener

Kay Melia

vkmelia@yahoo.com

For me to write knowledgeably about the growing and proper usage of peppers is a bit comparable to a plumber attempting to convince you that he could safely remove your appendix. The plumber and I might talk a good game, but when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, we both would surely fail.

Nevertheless, with pipe wrench in hand, I'm going to steal a couple of minutes of your time to tell my side of the story. I wish I knew more about the nuances of pepper flavors and textures and precisely describe to you the proper usage of them all. But if I tried to do that, I'd be lying to you, and mama told me never to do that. Therefore, I'll merely jot down a few words, about what I've learned about peppers after so many years of growing them, and the ones I enjoy growing and using.

Of one thing, I am sure. Among the hundreds of different varieties of pepper seeds available to plant in your garden, some are sweet, and others are hot, or pungent.

And there are some new ones that are sweet-hot. Knowing the difference when you select your seed or transplants is obviously important when harvest time rolls around.

I use a lot of peppers by average gardening standards, because I make a lot of salsa. I plant a couple of varieties of sweet peppers, and this year, I have successfully grown three varieties of the hot ones. Basically, they are the same ones I planted last year.

I plant the ones I plant after several years of trying dozens of different ones, finally settling on the ones that seem to work best in the salsa. I plant a bell pepper called Flavorburst, a relatively new one that is a beautiful lime green color, maturing to yellow late in the season.

They are aptly named and look great in the garden. They also seem to be welcome at the Farmer's Market. I also plant an older variety of a non-bell sweet pepper called Gypsy, a small yellow variety that is so very sweet, and the most productive pepper I know.

As far as the hot ones are concerned, I plant a beautiful jala-

peño called Mucho Nacho. They are big, with great jalapeño flavor. And then I plant a mild Anaheim whose name has changed three times due to patents, and is now called Biggie Chili. They grow to be 7- or 8-inches long and are truly beautiful. They're a must for my salsa.

Brand new this year is the Cajun Bell, a 2011 All America selection, so it must be good. It has true bell pepper flavor, with an added touch of heat. They are a small yellow bell that turns red as it matures. I have 3 healthy plants and they are fully loaded with fruit, but we'll see about the flavor at harvest time.

I raise all my own pepper plants so I have the freedom to grow the varieties I want. Choices can sometimes be difficult. One seed catalog carries 159 different varieties of pepper seeds, available in different sizes and colors, different degrees of sweetness and heat, and different textures and flavors. Knowing the precise use for them all would take a lifetime of testing and tasting. Wouldn't that be fun?

Casey's Comments

By Casey McCormick



mccormickcasey@rocketmail.com

Rural Kansas is a pretty special place. How many other sparsely populated areas are able to lure their state's senator?

Having Jerry Moran here last week for the annual Cheyenne County Farm Bureau Association dinner was good for the county. Anytime our elected officials get away from Washington and

back to their homes has got to help keep them attached.

I think a lot of Senator Moran. But when all is said and done, his ability to make changes is certainly limited. Just like the president, it takes a majority of others to bring about action.

That brings me to the point of this piece. When the senator was asked what can be done to get this country turned around he said, "start at home."

In other words, each and every one of us can strive to be the best American we can be. By holding onto our values, teaching by ex-

ample and keeping a strong faith in God, we can make a positive statement to others.

This may sound a bit corny, but I really believe he is on to something. Respecting ourselves and our neighbors sure would be a way to send a message to all who see rural Kansas.

And by working together we have more power to change things for the better.

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GOD SAYS
Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.
Romans 12:9-10

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Karen Krien Editor/Publisher
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Praise the Lord

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