

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, oftentimes, the Federal Government is called to spend billions of dollars to try and repair communities after they fall apart. It is far better for the Federal Government and its agencies to lead by example, and one of the ways that we can lead by example is best illustrated by the impact that the United States Postal Service has on our communities.

Post Offices are the heart and soul of America's small towns, drawing people to main streets and preserving the core of these communities. Despite this vital role, the Postal Service continues to move post offices to the outskirts of town, leaving devastated communities in their wake.

This is happening across the country, not just in my community in Oregon. I have heard similar stories from Washington, Montana, Colorado, Ohio, Louisiana, New York, and everywhere in between. Small downtowns across the country are being stranded despite the protest of town residents.

Mr. Speaker, it is absurd that the Postal Service gives its customers more say in which Elvis stamp to issue than where the post offices are located. Residents of Christianburg, Virginia, know this story all too well. They used to gather at a post office in the center of town to collect their mail and talk about the events of the day. Today, their main post office has moved 3 miles from downtown leaving only a small contact station in its wake. The gathering place for the community has become this window in a grocery store next to the motor oil and the fuel filters.

Fortunately, Christianburg residents refused to take this affront as the final word. Residents of the town, supported by the city council and their Chamber of Commerce, fought back and finally after a 2-year battle, it appears as though the Postal Service has conceded that a 'communications breakdown' occurred and they are apparently ready to reverse this decision.

Our nation's governors know that these post office relocations are directly contributing to the decline of their towns and reducing the access of the elderly and disabled to post office services. The governors have now asked for our help. They have asked Congress to eliminate the loophole that is keeping citizens from having a voice in these post office relocation decisions.

They have also asked that we require the Postal Service to comply with the same local zoning and building codes that apply to State and local governments. Governors made this request because they know firsthand the problems caused when the Postal Service claims immunity from the same laws that private citizens, businesses and local governments abide by.

Mr. Speaker, I agree with the governors and have introduced H.R. 1231, which would meet their goals. The Post Office Communities Partnership Act strengthens the voice of local citizens in decisions to relocate or rebuild postal facilities. It would give at least 60 days notice before renovating or relocating. It would require the Postal Service to consider a number of additional factors, including the community sentiment, the extent to which the post office is a part of a core downtown, and the effect a new facility may have on a community. And it must comply with all local zoning, planning and land use regulations.

The bill is fair. It does not place unnecessary burdens on the Postal Service. For the first time they would be treated as a responsible member of the community and not above local laws.

Mr. DOYLE. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity today to join with my distinguished colleagues to speak about H.R. 1231, the Post Office Relocation Act. In particular, I want to express my appreciation to Representative Blumenauer for organizing this forum and to recognize his efforts in fashioning thoughtful legislation that directly responds to the postal needs and concerns of constituents in every community in our country.

Regardless of where one may reside, the services that the U.S. Post Office provides are deeply rooted in the essence of community and by extension connote a sense of identity. Thus, rural and urban residents understandably react unfavorably when their mail delivery or local post office is altered in some way. A community's reaction is unduly compounded when they have a sense that their concerns and needs were not considered as part of the decision-making process.

In just the last year, I have been approached by several communities in the 18th Congressional District of Pennsylvania that are faced with some type of difficulty regarding postal services. While the circumstances of these cases are quite different, the level of frustration they have experienced with respect to their ability to interject individual thoughts and opinions has been the same.

The residents of Whitaker, Pennsylvania--in my district--have had to deal with having the operating hours of their local post office reduced to 10AM to 2PM. I don't care where you live, four hours of service is utterly inadequate. In a community nearby to Whitaker, the small, close-knit community of Jefferson Boro is currently being served by four different post offices. Can you imagine four different post offices delivering mail to one community of just over 3,000 households? In yet another part of my district, Rural Ridge has been trying to reach consensus with the U.S. Postal Service on what type of delivery best meets the needs of their community.

While the particulars of these cases are disparate, they all point to the need for greater participation on the part of affected individuals and communities in the decisions arrived at by the U.S. Postal Service. The Post Office Relocation Act is responsive to this need and lays out a reasonable structure through which substantive discourse will occur and collaborative decisions will be reached.

At the risk of being repetitive, I will not outline every provision of the bill. I do however, want to briefly highlight some parts that I think embody the common sense approach taken by Representative Blumenauer's legislation. As a starting point, H.R. 1231 would require the U.S. Postal Service to give residents a 60 day notice before the renovation, relocation, closing, or consolidation of their post office. This notice can either be hand delivered or delivered by mail. In addition, a notice of such action must be published in one or more newspapers of general circulation within the zip codes served.

The Post Office Relocation Act does not stop with this good beginning, but also incorporates an allowance for any person affected to offer an alternative proposal and the requirement for hearings to be conducted. Finally, this bill revises the factors that are considered to include the sentiment of the community, whether postal officials negotiated with persons served, and the adequacy of the existing post office.

The Post Office Relocation Act will most assuredly add to the great amount of respect that we all hold for the U.S. Postal Service. I am hopeful that this discussion will lead to more members adding their support to this bill which currently has 49 cosponsors. I also want to offer my strongest encouragement to the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Postal Service to examine this most necessary bill as soon as possible.

Again, I want to recognize Representative Blumenauer for introducing H.R. 1231, the Post Office Relocation Act. I appreciate having this chance to express my support for the bill.

Mr. BALDACCI. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in support of H.R. 1231, the Post Office Relocation Act. I am a proud cosponsor of this legislation and urge its passage.

Rural areas like my district especially feel the pinch when the post office announces the move of a local office. Post offices in such rural areas are the social and information centers in the town, and are usually located in the heart of the business district. Downtown areas in rural America are often fragile and many local businesses depend on the foot and car traffic which post offices attract.

One town in particular, Castine, is a small coastal town that is the home of the Maine Maritime Academy, faced a similar dilemma. Castine's post office, one of the oldest continually operating post offices in the country, was built in 1814 and has changed very little over time. Probably to the Postal Service it looks like a dilapidated, inefficient place to conduct business. But to the citizens of Castine, it was a treasured facility, an historic sight, and the heart and soul of the community.

It was Castine's bicentennial year and the townspeople were faced with losing a part of what makes their community so unique.

The Postal Service decided that Castine's office should be relocated out of the heart of downtown Castine, but the citizens had other ideas and many of them thought they could create the space needed to ensure quality mail service and they should not be shy about sharing them with the post office. And as a result of this outcry from the public and attention from national news organizations, the Postal Service reconsidered their proposal.

Mr. Speaker, this is good legislation. I appreciate being able to support the legislation.