

In with the...old? 'New' Congress, same challenges



Jan. 3 brought the end of the 112th Congress, a legislative body that both independent observers and NALC President Fredric Rolando called the least productive in modern American history.

"If we can say one good thing about the 112th Congress," Rolando said, "it's that its signature accomplishment—gridlock—managed to help keep from becoming law the deeply flawed postal reform measures that emerged from Capitol Hill over the past two years."

Although the Senate passed its reform bill, S. 1789, last April, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives refused to take it up for consideration. Instead, the House's focus was on Rep. Darrell Issa's H.R. 2309, a slash-and-burn piece of legislation that fortunately never moved out of Issa's Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

"The swearing-in of the new 113th Congress provides us an opportunity to start from scratch and fight for meaningful postal reform that actually addresses the main problems the Postal Service faces," Rolando said.

The biggest obstacle, of course, is the unaffordable, unfair and unreasonable mandate that the Postal Service spend billions of dollars each year to fully pre-fund 75 years' worth of future retiree health benefits.

"The current pre-funding scheme simply has got to go, and that remains a top legislative priority," Rolando said. "But there are other challenges, such as trying to recoup the billions the Postal Service has overpaid into the Civil Service Retirement System and the Federal Employees Retirement System.

"Factor in an outdated USPS business model and its equally inadequate governance structure," he added, "and it's plain to see that we have our work cut out for us.

"But letter carriers have never shied away from a challenge," Rolando said, "and we're not about to start now."

More cliffs ahead

At the end of 2012, much hay was made over the so-called "fiscal cliff," the colorful metaphor that described the combination of tax increases, spending cuts and deficit-reduction measures that were scheduled to take effect on Jan. 1 unless Congress intervened. "Given that the 11th-hour piecemeal legislation enacted on New Year's Day dealt only with the tax-increase aspect of the cliff's equation," Rolando noted, "our country still faces three more 'fiscal cliffs:'"

- the need to raise the nation's debt limit, or "ceiling," by the end of February,
- a March 1 deadline to negotiate a replacement of \$1 trillion in scheduled across-the-board budget cuts (known as "sequestration"), and
- the need to enact a continuing resolution to fund the federal government for the rest of the current fiscal year.

Letter carriers have stakes in all of the political battles surrounding these three "cliffs," the president said. "For example, if Congress fails to raise the debt limit—a very real possibility, thanks mainly to Tea Party political gamesmanship—it could plunge the country into a deep recession that would cripple the Postal Service," he said.

Sequestration might not affect us directly, Rolando noted, but some Republican proposals to dodge it could target federal employee pay and benefits.

"Meanwhile—and critically—Saturday mail delivery has been a mandate of annual appropriations bills for three decades," the president said, "so naturally we once again will have a stake in the battle to enact a government-funding continuing resolution that retains this crucial requirement.

"The various crises the Postal Service faces are real and are not going

away,” Rolando said. “That means that we will have to be better than ever as legislative activists in 2013.”

But we can’t simply be satisfied with blocking bad legislation, he added. “We must proactively fight battles on two fronts: to win enactment of good postal reform, and to defend our pay and benefits as budget wars rage around us.”

In the media

NALC President Fredric Rolando’s letter to the editor of the conservative-leaning *New York Post* was published Dec. 19. “If Congress addresses the pre-funding fiasco,” he wrote, “the Postal Service can do what it’s done for 200 years—adapt to an evolving society.”

A Jan. 9 *Washington Post* Fed Page column by Joe Davidson that discussed the Government Accountability Office’s ongoing support of the pre-funding requirement noted Rolando’s call for Congress to “reject the GAO’s policy myopia.... Government records show that 80 percent of all the USPS red ink stems directly from pre-funding.”

As 2012 ended and 2013 began, a flurry of articles, editorials and letters to the editor appeared in news outlets across America that reflected the public’s support for the Postal Service and for letter carriers, as well as growing knowledge about the financial situation at the USPS.

Sacramento Branch 133 member Thomas Laput was the focus of a *San Francisco Chronicle* feature printed on Saturday, Jan. 5, that compared his 20-year first career in the Air Force with the 20 years in his second career as a letter carrier.

Huntington, WV Branch 359 Secretary Frank Wayne Carter’s Dec. 30 letter to the editor of Huntington’s *Herald-Dispatch* warned residents about possible negative consequences if H.R. 2309 were to become law.

Washington, DC Branch 142 member Kenny Clark was profiled in a Dec. 30

Washington Post article that reported how customers on Clark’s Bethesda, MD, route had celebrated a “Kudos for Kenny Day” the week before.

On Dec. 14, Madison, WI Branch 507 President Bob Kasper explained the real reasons behind the Postal Service’s financial problems and answered questions from callers as a guest on WXXM-FM’s hour-long afternoon-drive program, “The People’s Mic.”

A positive editorial by John W. Stevenson, the publisher and editor of the weekly *Randolph Reader* in Alabama, ran Wednesday, Jan. 2. Two days later, an editorial in the Chincoteague, VA *Beacon* correctly blamed the Postal Service’s financial on Congress’ “disastrous” pre-funding mandate. And a Jan. 6 editorial in the Shamokin, PA *News-Item* covered similar ground with that paper’s readers.

A letter to the editor of the *Daily News-Record* in Harrisonburg, VA, ran Dec. 27 and praised USPS for particular care with Christmas package deliveries. A Dec. 30 letter to the editor of Mason City, IA’s *Globe Gazette* expressed gratitude along the same lines, while a similar “rave” about the Postal Service from a Jacksonville, FL, customer was published Jan. 4 in *The Florida Times-Union*.

A New Year’s Day letter to the editor of the *Binghamton (NY) Press & Sun Bulletin* noted that without the “ridiculous” pre-funding law, the USPS “would be \$1.5 billion in the black and saving several thousand jobs nationwide.” Across the country two days later, a reader of central California’s *The Modesto Bee* made much the same point.

In a Jan. 12 e-mail blast to his constituents, Virginia Republican Rep. J. Randy Forbes thanked letter carriers in particular, along with teachers, members of the military and first responders for their dedication to public service. **PR**

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—NALC President Fredric Rolando