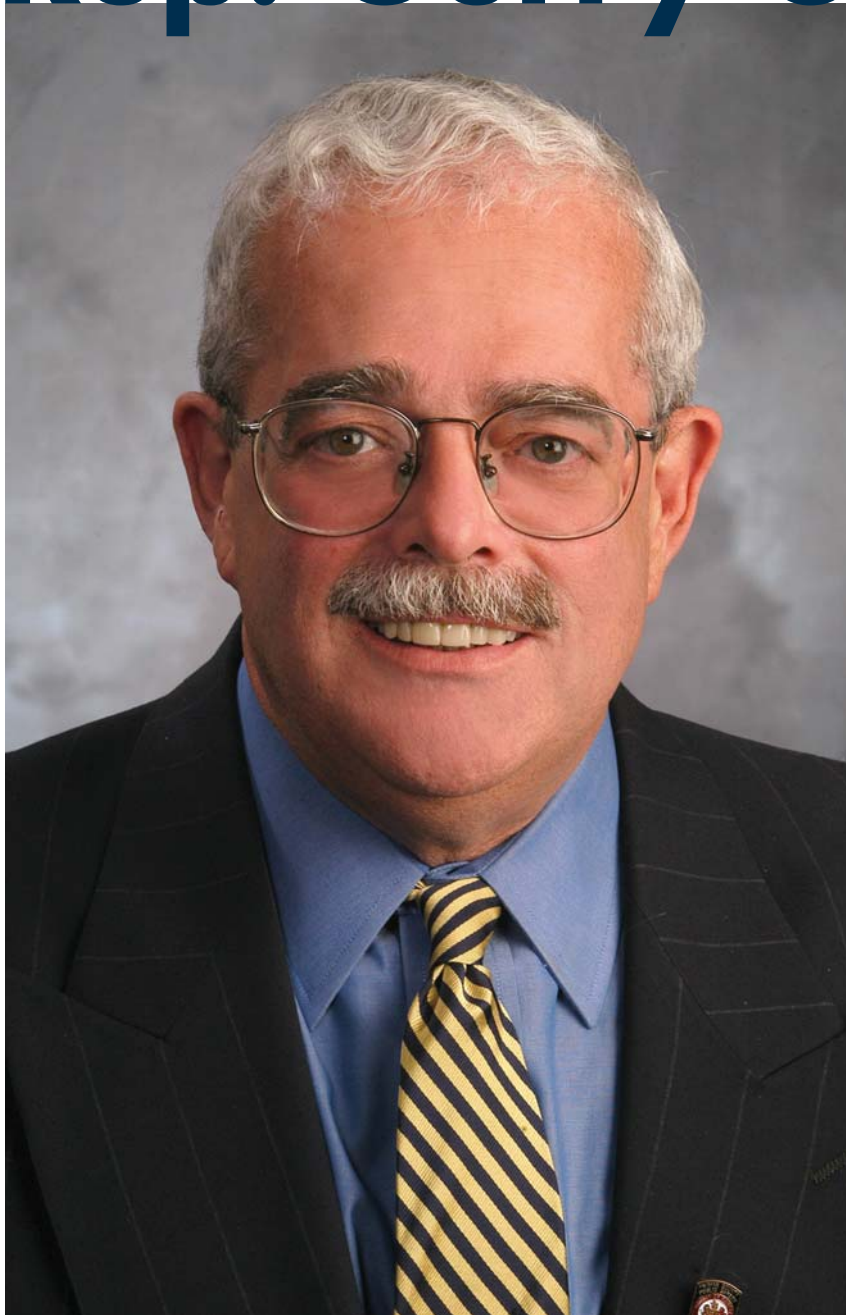


Q & A

Rep. Gerry Connolly



Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-VA), who represents suburban Washington, DC, serves on the House Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Post Office, and the District of Columbia. The panel oversees the U.S. Postal Service. He is a stalwart proponent of workers' rights and, in recent years, has made concerted efforts to defend federal workers against attacks on their pay and benefits.

In the last Congress (2011-2012), Connolly introduced H.R. 1262, the Reform the Postal Service for the 21st Century Act. It included innovative strategies to attract new business and increase mail volumes, including by allowing the USPS to sell non-postal products. While that legislation was not enacted and would have to be reintroduced in the current Congress, Connolly remains committed to preserving and reforming the Postal Service for generations to come.

Since he is an outspoken House member and NALC ally, we thought it would be beneficial for letter carriers to hear Rep. Connolly's views on the ideological conflicts on Capitol Hill, and on what citizens can do to save America's Postal Service.

Q: Remembering your forward-looking postal legislation from the 112th Congress, what is your vision for a Postal Service of the future that best serves all Americans?

A: Congress has a sacred obligation to preserve and strengthen the United States Postal Service to fulfill the founders' original vision of a robust, national postal system that binds our country together as one nation. We must never forget that the Postal

Service is one of the few American institutions that our founders explicitly established in Article I, Section 8, of the U.S. Constitution. I believe any effective comprehensive postal reform legislation must focus on freeing the Postal Service from congressional micromanagement, while sustaining its critical strengths that will enable the Postal Service to transform and grow its business model to thrive in the 21st century.

From driving economic growth to fostering democracy, the Postal Service has been a key engine of our country's growth and development since its inception. Today, the Postal Service is the foundation of an American mailing industry that supports 8.4 million jobs and generates more than \$1.3 trillion in sales revenue—figures that put our mailing industry on par with other major economic sectors, such as the airline and oil and natural gas industries, which respectively support about 10 million jobs each and actually generate slightly less annual revenue.

Undermining our valuable mailing industry would not serve any American well, particularly households that have embraced the digital age, yet rely on parcel carriers to make e-commerce a reality. Just as Congress is rightly focused on expanding high-speed Internet access to every corner of the country, it is just as vital that we preserve a robust Postal Service to provide every household in America an opportunity to participate in the e-commerce revolution.

I strongly reject the false premise being pushed by anti-Postal Service special interests that our nation must dismantle the Postal Service in order to save it. In fact, in an era where rapid technological advancements are pushing more and more individuals to pay their bills online and communicate through e-mail, there is a greater need than ever for the Postal Service to grow its business and operate in an innovative, dynamic fashion to meet society's evolving needs.

For example, certain foreign postal services have taken the lead in providing secure electronic communications, while the visionary Postal Service inspector general has floated a promising proposal that would position the Postal Service to serve as the primary facilitator for the expansion and implementation of transformative electronic government initiatives by federal agencies. There are many visionary proposals and ideas being developed across the country; however, the one unifying thread tying them together is they are all “big” ideas aimed at *growing*, not cutting or eliminating, the Postal Service's reach and mission.

With respect to specific components of postal reform legislation, I believe any effective postal reform measure should adhere to the following six principles. First, and most importantly, Congress must provide the Postal Service with significant relief from the current absurd future retiree health benefits pre-funding requirement that demands USPS pre-fund 75 years' worth of health care benefits over a 10-year period, and [Congress also should] refund billions in FERS and CSRS overpayments back to the Postal Service. No other government agency or private-sector company utilizes such a draconian pre-funding requirement—which, in fiscal year 2012, accounted for \$11.1 billion of the Postal Service's total loss of \$15.9 billion. This onerous requirement is a slow, twisting knife into the Postal Service, causing the agency to hemorrhage cash, and rendering meaningless any USPS efficiency gains and cost-saving achievements.

Second, we must sustain six-day mail and package delivery, which provides vital services to millions of Americans and thousands of businesses across America, and remains a key competitive advantage for the Postal Service.

Third, the Postal Service should be required to establish and follow a rigorous, empirical and transparent process when evaluating whether to



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close postal retail or processing facilities. And to ensure accountability, the Postal Regulatory Commission must have the authority to review and overturn closure decisions.

Fourth, we must authorize the Postal Service to modernize its business model through innovative service enhancements, such as co-locating retail and government services with postal facilities. This will not only boost revenues, but increase convenience to everyday Americans, who would benefit from being able to simultaneously renew their drivers licenses while mailing a package, or numerous other possibilities.

Fifth, we should require the Postal Service to stay focused on transforming its business model and prevent it from engaging in complex, costly distractions, such as opting out of the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan to start its own health care plan from scratch.

And lastly, any legislation should reject one-size-fits-all delivery solutions, such as requiring clusterbox and curbside delivery. These options may be appropriate for certain communities, but clearly are not feasible for many others and, if adopted across the board, would decimate America's dedicated letter carrier workforce, and ultimately the entire Postal Service.

Many of the changes I've listed were featured in the bipartisan Senate bill, S. 1789, which passed last Congress with a super majority. Although S. 1789 was far from perfect, I believe it struck a reasonable balance between competing interests, and I was disappointed that our House Republican leadership refused to consider and debate S. 1789 in committee, or on the floor, where it could have been perfected through amendments. I hope that as the 113th Congress moves forward, we can advance comprehensive postal reform legislation that promotes a more innovative, dynamic, and most impor-

tantly, growing United States Postal Service that fulfills our founders' vision to connect and unify our nation in the 21st century.

Q: Why is it so hard to get a good piece of postal reform legislation through Congress?

A: In Congress, there are two divergent approaches—and really, philosophies—with respect to postal reform. As I noted, one side presents a false choice to the American people, attempting to deceive the American public into believing that we must dismantle the Postal Service in order to save it. Last Congress, Republican leadership of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform proposed a radical and destructive bill, the so-called “Postal Reform Act,” which essentially sought to save the patient by bleeding it.

[Editor's note: Connolly is referring to Rep. Darrell Issa's (R-CA) H.R. 2309, which NALC opposed vigorously.]

Specifically, this irredeemable legislation sought to gut mail service for all Americans—whether from rural hamlets or large cities; devastate postal customers—from the largest business mailers to the small businesses that ship their products through the mail; and destroy postal jobs—mandating arbitrary layoffs of postal employees and prohibiting severance pay by statute. In short, this bill would have abrogated a constitutional responsibility; undermined a trillion-dollar private mailing industry; and eviscerated middle-class jobs for postal employees.

This legislation did not represent a good-faith effort to strike a reasonable compromise among various postal stakeholders, and I am proud to have done everything in my power to ensure Congress rejected it. The bottom line is that if one truly questions the very purpose or existence of the Postal Service—whether because it's large, unionized and quasi-governmental, or simply because they

believe privatization would be more effective—it is very difficult to engage in a collaborative and productive legislative process, because the ultimate goals and end games are diametrically opposed from a policymaker who believes the Postal Service fulfills a sacred, constitutional responsibility to the American public.

Q: Considering the good work the Postal Service does in connecting rural America, do you think there's a way to boost bipartisan support for postal reform legislation?

A: Well, as you know, members of Congress often divide along postal reform issues just as much by region as they do by party. For example, the rural caucus is comprised of many Republican members who represent districts that are traditionally very conservative, yet many of its members strongly oppose efforts to abandon the universal-service obligation, which would further isolate rural communities and businesses from more populated urban and suburban regions.

I was proud to introduce a bipartisan resolution [H.Res. 30] with my Republican colleague, Congressman Sam Graves of Missouri, which expresses a sense of the House that our nation should sustain six-day delivery, which provides vital services to millions of Americans and thousands of businesses across the nation. The broad bipartisan support for this resolution—which currently boasts 169 co-sponsors—demonstrates there is potential to assemble a diverse coalition of stakeholders in support of postal reform.

Q: Do you see the challenges for postal legislation in Congress as part of a broader attack on public—and especially federal—workers?

A: Absolutely. As I've previously stated, I believe there are certain members who are simply ideologically pre-disposed to hate

an institution such as the Postal Service, which is large, unionized, and at its core, focused on fulfilling a public service, not just maximizing profits. There are certainly members who believe that if the private sector can fulfill a function—even if just in theory—then the public sector has no business being involved, even if it's a quasi-governmental corporation that primarily supports itself from revenue and not taxpayer dollars.

Q: What can people do to help push for a stronger Postal Service?

A: Now more than ever, it is critical that people lobby their representatives to express support for comprehensive postal reform that aims to strengthen, not dismantle, the Postal Service. Further, as public polling indicates, many common myths and misconceptions have become conventional wisdom that are reported verbatim by certain editorial boards—namely that we must cut the Postal Service to save it, and that technological advancements have rendered our postal network an antiquated relic—a myth that is directly contradicted by the sheer size of our nation's mailing industry, and the vital role the Postal Service plays in e-commerce operations and last-mile delivery for private carriers. In addition, it is critical that we all continue to publicize the absurd and onerous pre-funding requirement—which, as your readers know but many Americans do not—is the overwhelming causal factor behind the Postal Service's double-digit, billion-dollar losses. If the public persists in thinking that eliminating Saturday mail delivery—which is not even guaranteed to save any money over the long term—is the key to saving the Postal Service, then we will never build the necessary coalition and political muscle needed to spur members of Congress to act. **PR**

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