

## Missing the Point – It's time to privatize the mail.

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Photo by the author.

That image under the title? That's the curbside view of the cluster mailbox that serves the seven homes on our cul-de-sac.

You can see, on the left, the keyhole that our mail delivery person uses to open the back of the mailbox and put pre-sorted mail into the appropriate boxes for each house. It's a process that includes stuffing small boxes and soft plastic garment bags into individual boxes that were never designed to hold more than a few letters, magazines and catalogs. And now you know why Carvana uses flatbed trucks to deliver the cars you buy online rather than mails them to you. ...There's rust everywhere. Some of the edges are sharp. The top is bent up, exposing the contents of the mailbox to the elements. It wobbles badly on its two metal legs, tired as they are from years of neglect.

Why haven't my neighbors and I kept it in good repair? Well, while I can't speak for my neighbors, I haven't invested in cluster mailbox maintenance because I don't own it. Neither does our homeowners association. It belongs to the Post Office. They've confirmed that in writing.

Starting a few months ago, I took some pictures of our mailbox and wrote a nice email to the Postmaster of our local Post Office respectfully asking that it be replaced. Eventually the Postmaster tells me, "No." She explains that, even though the Post Office owns the cluster mailboxes, it's the responsibility of our

HOA to maintain them. If not the HOA, then the residents whose mail the box is meant to receive. And she refers me to [Section 632 \("Mail Receptacles"\) of the Postal Operations Manual](#) for a description of Post Office policy on the matter. This is the Postmaster's response, even while admitting that they have, in fact, replaced cluster mailboxes at their expense, now and then, here and there.

There's [a scene](#) from the original "Ghostbusters" in which Bill Murray is being seduced by an "occupied" Sigourney Weaver who he finds very attractive. He declines at first, saying "I make it a rule never to get involved with possessed people." But then she kisses him, to which he responds with, "Actually, it's more of guideline than a rule." That last quote is indicative of my reaction to reading the Postal Operations Manual.

It's a manual, for crying out loud, or is it, in fact, the law which is what the Post Office wants me and all the other people who need new cluster mailboxes to believe? And that question got me thinking.

*"Always a dangerous thing."*

I know, but I can't help myself. Here's what I found out...

- For one thing, the US Postal Service is a mess. Volume is way down, costs are up, [service is continuing to decline](#) and it's hemorrhaging money to the tune of billions of dollars a year.
- According to a [July 2011 study](#) by the USPS Office of the Inspector General, the cost to deliver mail to the door of your house in an urban market averaged \$353 per year, \$224 per year to deliver to your own curbside mailbox, but only \$160 per address to deliver to a cluster mailbox. Moving everyone's delivery to cluster mailboxes could save the Post Office almost \$10 billion per year. So, the Post Office is converting everyone to cluster mailboxes as quickly as it can.
- Why won't the Post Office replace my cluster mailbox and others without a fight? Without a call from our Congressman's office? Because they can't afford to replace all the damaged cluster mailboxes they own. There's no law – certainly not one passed by Congress – mandating that we pay for the maintenance and replacement of the cluster mailboxes that the Post Office owns and insists that we use. Holding us responsible for taking care of its cluster mailboxes is nothing more than Post Office policy, wishful thinking by an agency drowning in red ink.

There are two problems with the Post Office that Congress needs to fix. One is that the Post Office is what's called an "independent agency." Our federal government has [66 such agencies](#) including, for example, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Election Commission, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Science Foundation, the Security and Exchange Commission, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission *and the US Postal Service*.

What all these and the many other independent agencies have in common is that they answer only to Congress and not to the President. In fact, the reason they're independent agencies is to eliminate the potential for political influence by the President. The President has limited influence over these independent agencies through budgetary process, but that's about it. Think about it. The President can tell the Secretaries of Defense and State what to do, for example, but not the Postmaster General. Heaven forbid if he tries. The Post Office might insist that The White House share a cluster mailbox with the other Cabinet offices. Only Congress can tell the Postmaster General what to do – and Congress is a hot, conflicted, under-performing mess with too many of its own issues to take problems with the USPS seriously.

Making matters even worse, as [independent agencies](#) and within the authority granted to them by Congress when they were created, many of these agencies' rules and regulations do, in fact, have the force of federal law. So, when somebody, and unelected official, working for the USPS suggests that

the maintenance and replacement of cluster mailboxes owned by the USPS should be someone else's responsibility, that's that?! Yikes. How is that a good example of representative government in action?

That's one problem. The second problem is that the USPS is not a for-profit company. It's a non-profit agency. If you believe at all, even a teeny bit, in the efficiency of competitive, for-profit capitalism, you will tell your Representative – via email or telephone, but not regular mail, because it might not ever get there – to privatize the delivery of our mail.

For those of you who are Republicans and haven't lost your minds or lost sight of the conservative principles on which your party used to be based, the USPS as it is currently structured – as a non-profit independent agency – is an example of socialism, of government ownership of the means of production, at its worst. There is no social and no economic justification for mail service to be owned and operated by government. Maybe it should be run like a utility, but privately owned by a for-profit entity. Regulated by government? Yes. But not as a monopoly owned and operated by an independent government agency.

A new private sector system for delivering paper mail will be much more efficient and less expensive for the postal services our country's people and companies need.

-Les Cohen

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