

Missing the Point – Privatizing the Post Office, Part 2

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Featured image is by the author.

Several months ago, I wrote [an op/ed](#) suggesting that we privatize our Postal Service. The USPS is “an independent agency.” It doesn’t answer to the President, but only to Congress. ...The same dysfunctional Congress that does little or nothing, in which one party has lost its way and is currently holding the country’s economy hostage by withholding its approval of an increase in the debt ceiling. The same Congress in which the other party pushes its programs with reckless disregard for how much they cost and how we’re going to pay for them.

What a mess. The person upon whom I depend most for advice tells me “*They’re all a bunch of yahoos.*” She’s right. No argument there. Expecting Congress to deal with USPS inefficiencies and persistent losses is like complaining to a hoard of patrons actively engaged in a roadhouse brawl that the juke box just took your quarter, but isn’t playing anything. The point is, it’s darn near impossible to get anyone’s attention. Nobody cares.

The Post Office is continually losing money struggling to provide mail delivery services that are, to an increasing extent, irrelevant. We don’t need mail delivery six days a week. There are other, private sector services that are very capable of getting us hard copies of important documents if necessary. And we need a way of unsubscribing to advertising, catalogs, political mailings and other junk. We need the equivalent of a [CAN-SPAM Act](#) for regular mail. Bad management loves a lack of supervision. In the

absence of comprehensive and intelligent Congressional involvement, the USPS is out of control.

In my previous op/ed on the subject of privatization, I took the liberty of describing a situation that is affecting my neighbors and me personally, the failure of the USPS to take responsibility for the repair and replacement of what are called “Cluster Mailbox Units” (CBU) that are throughout Columbia and other communities. These CBUs save our Postal Service substantial money by allowing our mailmen and women to deliver mail from their trucks without having to stop at individual mailboxes in front each of our homes.

The “Before” picture on the left of the image at the top of this piece is the back of the cluster mailbox that serves the families on the cul-de-sac where I live. It’s rusted all around, wobbly on its two legs that attach it to our sidewalk and the lid is bent up, exposing mail inside to the weather. It cries out for replacement. The “Before” picture was taken months ago, earlier in my efforts to get the Post Office to replace this CBU. The “After” picture on the right is what our CBU looks like now, after the USPS has failed to respond to information I provided through the good offices of our Congressman, John Sarbanes.

While the Honorable Mr. Sarbanes is a member of the same august body to which the USPS answers, he’s only one out of 435. Ignoring an inquiry from Mr. Sarbanes’ office – on behalf of a single constituent – isn’t a problem for the Post Office bureaucracy. The Congressman is busy, as he should be, with more important matters and the constituent – That’s me. – lacks the time and resources to be a serious problem on his own. Their lack of response is entirely predictable. *“Ignore them, put it off, leave it for the local Postmaster to handle, whatever, and it’ll go away.”*

1. The Columbia Association asserts that the Post Office owns our mailboxes...

When I first started my quest for new cluster mailbox, well more than a year ago, I contacted our village’s Columbia Association representative. The CA is our homeowners’ association. He told me that there was nothing he could do for us because the CBUs were owned by the Post Office. Spoiler alert... He was right.

2. The Ellicott City Postmaster confirms that the Post Office owns our mailboxes, but will only replace mailboxes that are badly deteriorated or damaged.

More recently, in communications I had with the Postmaster for the Ellicott City Post Office that serves our village, she agreed. The Post Office owns the cluster mailboxes in Columbia, *but would not replace them unless they were so badly deteriorated or damaged as to adversely affect the delivery of mail or its condition.*

3. The Ellicott City Postmaster changes her position saying that the Post Office will not replace mailboxes it owns regardless of their condition.

Sometime later, after a service truck or some other vehicle struck our mailbox and bent up its lid, she changed her position to deny any responsibility for repair or replacement, period, *regardless of the condition of the CBU*.

4. I ask Congressman John Sarbanes for his assistance.

Finding myself unable to compel the Ellicott City Post Office to honor its responsibilities as owner of our CBU, I turned to the office of our Congressman, John Sarbanes. For the record, I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Sarbanes. My contact with his offices has been exclusively with one of his constituent services specialists.

5. With the help of Congressman Sarbanes' constituent services, a call occurs between a member of his staff, a USPS customer service rep and me.

The constituent services person helping me reviewed materials I gave her and took a different route. Instead of contacting the Ellicott City Postmaster on my behalf, she made arrangements for me to talk to a USPS customer service rep. As the call went along, I admit to being frustrated and perhaps a tad less than polite in my tone and attitude.

6. This USPS rep denies responsibility for replacing our mailbox, but this time on the grounds that the Post Office does not own it – or any of the other Columbia Cluster Box Units.

My problem was not so much that the USPS rep was reiterating that they were not responsible for our cluster mailbox. No. My problem was that, for the first time, a representative of the USPS was denying any responsibility on the grounds that the USPS does not, in fact, own our CBUs.

So, I said to her, the USPS rep, “If I can give you hard, written confirmation that you own our mailboxes, will that be sufficient?” She was polite, but non-committal, because, in fact, she wasn’t on the call to resolve a problem. Her only purpose was to let me and, more importantly, the Congressman’s office think that the USPS was paying attention to the inquiry – which they were not.

7. The Columbia Association confirms, in writing, the existence of a special agreement between the CA and USPS which re-affirms ownership by the Post Office.

There's an adage in business which says, *"Never accept a 'No' from someone without the authority to say 'Yes.'"* And I am nothing if not persistent. So, once again, I contacted the Columbia Association which has been extremely helpful and from which I obtained the text you see below. To quote from the cover email I received from the Columbia Association, it's *"an excerpt from a meeting in 2021 between CA management and a representative of the local USPS regarding the maintenance of the neighborhood mailboxes."*

Date: February 3, 2021: Subject: Cluster Box Ownership & Maintenance Procedures

USPS owns the single family neighborhood cluster boxes in Columbia neighborhoods.

USPS is required to maintain the cluster boxes. Maintenance requests should be made directly to the current acting USPS Postmaster. A maintenance request will be submitted.

However, USPS's budget constraints do not provide money for equipment replacement and at this time the post office is just doing the minimum equipment repair necessary for mail delivery.

Postal Bulletin 25545, "Mailbox Improvement Week" specifically gives direction to the Postmaster or their assigns to maintain the cluster box equipment, including a variety of aesthetic concerns. Chapter 6 of the Postal Operations Manual also establishes the single family neighborhood cluster boxes as USPS equipment and gives the Postmaster direction for dealing with this equipment.

However, currently, USPS has no money for addressing aesthetic issues with cluster mailboxes. Therefore, the USPS current policy for cluster boxes is to repair, not to replace them. If the boxes cannot be repaired, they will be replaced with an old box, not a new one. Only repairs for broken or damaged locks and unsafe conditions will be addressed, not aesthetic issues. Currently, the Post Office is only repairing broken, damaged, or unsafe cluster boxes.

Residents are welcome to crowdsource, fundraise, or come up with other ways to privately acquire the \$1400+ needed for a new USPS approved cluster box.

Note, in the first line of the text, that the ***"USPS owns the single family neighborhood cluster boxes in Columbia neighborhoods."***

Keep in mind that problems with our cluster mailbox are not just *"aesthetic."* They're functional, affecting the delivery and condition of the mail – and may, in fact, be problematic for children playing in the cul-de-sac. That the Post Office is financially strapped and unable to maintain the mailboxes it owns is its problem, not ours, which it should discuss with Congress. Other than paying for postage and our taxes, it's not our job to subsidize a financially and administratively troubled independent agency providing a service in serious need of redefinition.

No doubt, USPS management is trying as hard as it can to avoid having to incur the cost of replacing a great many of Columbia's aging Cluster Mailbox Units. At \$1400+ per unit, plus installation, the costs for replacing these CBUs could be millions of dollars. And who knows what precedent that might set elsewhere in Maryland and around the country.

8. Congressman Sarbanes' office delivers proof of ownership by the USPS to the Post Office. Five weeks later and we're still waiting to hear back from them.

So, I gave the language of the agreement between the CA and USPS to the Sarbanes' constituent services specialist with whom I've been working. And she gave it to the USPS. Five weeks later and what have we heard? Nothing. Not even a polite, "*We're working on it.*" Zip.

9. Now what?

No question about it, there are far more important problems – for Congressman Sarbanes and the Post Office – than our getting a new cluster mailbox. I get it. But then this op/ed isn't about Congressman Sarbanes. It's not about me. I mean who really gives a hoot if Les and his neighbors need a new mailbox? That's not the question you should be considering.

And it's certainly not about the quality of individuals who process and deliver our mail. Of course not.

The problem is with the management and Congressional supervision of an independent agency of the federal government that is gaming a dysfunctional Congress to get away with inefficiency and abuse of its authority while avoiding the question of whether we need the full array of services it provides.

Where do I go from here given that the USPS isn't responding, not just to me, but not even to an inquiry by Congressman Sarbanes? Should I consider finding legal support for a class action suit? Or just stop whining and go back to talking about more important matters? But then, if I throw in the towel, what are you going to do about big government ignoring smaller issues that are part of your lives.?

Any comments and suggestions you may have will be greatly appreciated.

-Les Cohen

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