A Casualty of the Digital Age

By Mel Lavine

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In case you missed it, starting January 22, the postal service will increase by one cent its first-class postage to 45 cents.

Meantime, the day when you can put a check into the mail to pay a bill due the next day is nearly over.

In its drive to save billions (in the last three years it lost nearly 30% of its first-class business to

the Internet), the U.S. Postal Service has decided to shut down half of its 487 processing centers nationwide. The move, the New York Times reported, is expected to do away with some 28,000 jobs and “increase the distance that mail must travel between post offices and reprocessing centers.” It would be the first time in 40 years that the post office has cut back on its deliveries.

The baseline for delivering the mail is one to three days within mainland United States. Sooner or later you’ll probably have to add two or three days to the delivery time.

I take it most people would not notice the loss of postal service since they’ve long been accustomed to doing their business online. But this is not the case with all of us.

There are people, both young and old, in good health and ailing, who have neither the desire or the means to do their business online. A large number depend on the public library. I’m sure you’ve seen them. They’re either at the computer or waiting for their turn.

“Am I supposed to make a special trip to the library every time I need to pay a bill?” a reader asked in a letter to the New York Times. “Not a very practical solution.” And she added, “The post office is still a valuable government service.”

And there are people – like the Lady Friend and me - who depend on the letter-carrier (and may even know his or her name). I should add that no mail is more welcome than a personal letter on genuine stationery in a friend's handwriting, dispatched with a stamp pleasing to the eye.

In its planning, the post office has called for closing up to 3,700 of the nation's 32,000 post offices, reducing deliveries to five days week from six and cutting the work force of 653,000 workers by more than 100,000.

The contemplated changes, especially a five-day-a-week delivery, would require congressional action. With many of the lawmakers among the "1 percenters" (reportedly about 250 and the gap in wealth between them and the people they represent growing), don't be shocked. Whatever they do about the post office, it will not be in the public interest.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.