Saving the Post Office

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

The other day we learned that the postal service plans to drop Saturday delivery of first-class mail beginning the first week in August. The move is to save the struggling agency 2 billion a year.

Ending Saturday delivery probably won't plug the hemorrhaging and could make matters worse if people are angry enough at the loss of service to pursue a wholly digital life. Remains to be seen, but for now there will still be life in the 237-year-old institution. The P.O. will deliver packages and prescription drugs six days a week and will not change post office operating hours.

As postmaster General Patrick Donahoe put it, “The choice is either changes to some of the services or raise prices, and people don’t want prices raised.”

I first wrote about saving the post office in this column a while back, confessing, “I have a soft spot for the post office. Years ago when I was between jobs as a newspaperman, the post office was a place to come in from the cold.

“In the early 1950s I found work as a mail handler in San Francisco before a reporter’s job came through. Some years later, down and out and married and trying my hand at free-lance writing, I found work as a clerk and letter-carrier in Santa Cruz. I stayed on for a couple of years before I realized my place was in a newsroom.” The post office saved my life. Today people are asking: is the post office really necessary? I say yes.

In the earlier piece I said, “It is one of the few institutions – and the oldest of American major public services established by a decree of the Continental Congress and promoted by Benjamin Franklin – that retains a human face. Millions of American rely on the local post office. In neighborhoods and small towns it is the heart of the community.”

And I added: “The post office is a life line for half of the country’s rural population. It delivers the mail to every corner of America, and goes to great lengths so that no one is left out, even in

wilderness areas where the mail, food and supplies are delivered by bush planes and by mule trains on the floor of the Grand Canyon for native Americans." So far as I know this is still true.

What triggered that column was a cartoon a friend sent me. It showed a mother telling her kids that the newspaper is reporting the government may stop delivering letters on Saturday. One child, sitting at a laptop, asks, "What's a letter?" The other, fiddling with an iPod, asked, "What's a newspaper?"

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