

In this Postal Service debate cost trumps convenience

Murf Raquet/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

It's no secret the U.S. Postal Service is a money pit. It has been losing billions of dollars annually for years.

For the first three months of this year, it has lost a reported \$1.9 billion.

There are many factors contributing to the growing debt: competition from other delivery services; emails are instantaneous and can be received and sent from all manner of devices; a cumbersome bureaucracy; a mandate to fill a pension fund; smaller, unnecessary post offices; and delivery procedures that no longer make sense.

Various solutions have been suggested, debated, amended, studied and, in most cases, rejected or shelved until later. A few years ago, a good case was made to phase out Saturday deliveries, a move that would have saved hundreds of millions of dollars.

Saturday deliveries continue, however, and Congress seems reluctant to budge.

Last week, the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform debated a bill that would require the USPS to eliminate door-to-door deliveries at the rate of 1.5 million addresses per year for the next decade. For those addresses centralized communal or curbside boxes would be used.

The idea is nothing new. Such boxes already exist in newer developments throughout the country. Last year, the Postal Service stopped allowing new housing projects a choice of home delivery. Such developments are given a cluster of mailboxes in a common area, where residents can collect their mail.

The Postal Service's largest fixed cost is delivery at \$30 billion a year - that breaks down to about \$380 per door stop in most cities.

Curbside mailbox delivery is put at \$240 per stop and cluster boxes cost \$170. It's easy to see how ending door-to-door deliveries would save \$4.5 billion a year.

For those postal customers with disabilities who are unable to leave their homes waivers could be given. Others who want to continue home delivery could pay extra for it.

If passed, the bill would give the USPS more control over personnel and benefit costs, as well as flexibility in pricing - something the agency has wanted for some time.

The delivery changes will have some positive and negative side effects - like most change. But it will be a fix - albeit a small one - to the Postal Service's money woes.