

...Beaverton Post Office contracts out mail delivery service

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the Arbor Parc Bethany contract was advertised on Craigslist, and no qualified contractors stepped forward. When USPS started getting calls from several newspapers, management asked supervisors if they knew anyone who could deliver the route. On March 9, USPS signed a 120-day emergency contract with the son of a Beaverton postal supervisor, who then subcontracted with his girlfriend to do the delivery. Service to the development began March 12.

But the inconvenience to Higgins and his neighbors calls into question the postmaster's assertion — in a Jan. 29 letter to Hansen — that contracting out wouldn't harm the public interest. Under its nationwide labor agreement with NALC, public interest is one of several things USPS is supposed to consider before contracting out — along with cost, efficiency and qualification of employees.

USPS has had the option to contract out delivery since the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, and private contractors already handle 1.9 percent of deliveries nationwide — mainly on highway routes in rural areas.

Arbor Parc is a change in scale. While Hansen was told to expect 374 new residences at that particular development, Jeffrey said 12,000 to 15,000 homes are planned for the area. That would make it the largest private

postal delivery contract in Oregon and Southwest Washington, and could account for as many as a dozen letter carrier jobs.

Jeffrey stressed that Post Office management isn't converting existing routes to private carriers, just new routes.

But such assurances aren't much comfort to letter carriers, who see Arbor Parc as a foot in a door, and worry that the door will soon be wide open.

Lee, who came to Beaverton after a two-year stint as postmaster in Tacoma, Washington, initiated a smaller privatization there last year when a newly built 128-unit condominium — a downtown city block surrounded by existing postal routes — was assigned to a contractor.

That's the kind of thing that drives Hansen up the wall. Computerized route management and automated sorting have made the U.S. Postal Service the most efficient in the world, but Hansen thinks privatization could undo that. How could it be efficient to have letter carriers walking all around a building, but leaving the building itself to a private contractor who would have to make a special trip?

"Universal delivery is an economic strength of our postal system," Hansen said. "I don't think it's possible to lose economy of scale and not lose economic efficiency also."

Letter carriers are also worried



Willie Higgins is one of a dozen early homebuyers at the new Arbor Parc Bethany development in Beaverton. For over a month, he and the others had to drive five miles to pick up their mail because of a USPS decision to privatize mail delivery.

about erosion of public confidence in the mails. While the Internet has emerged as a postal service competitor, the public still views mail as the safest way to pay bills. But what happens when the public sees contractors in street clothes driving up in their own

personal vehicles and opening mailboxes? And what will be the impact of higher turnover, diluted accountability, diminished professionalism? Union letter carriers are long-term, career employees of USPS, starting at \$17 an hour and topping out at \$22, whereas

contract employees who clear \$10 an hour will jump ship when an \$11-an-hour job comes along.

And, Hansen adds, NALC members are federal employees who take an oath to uphold the Constitution. They have relationships in the community, collect food for the needy in annual drives, and serve as neighborhood eyes and ears. They are trained and ready to deliver medicine in the event of a national emergency, and are committed enough that mail service was uninterrupted in the days following the 2001 anthrax attacks. Two out of five USPS letter carriers are armed services veterans, owing to federal hiring rules that give preference to veterans. Contractors face no such requirement.

USPS is America's second largest employer after Wal-Mart, and as employers they could hardly be more different.

Jeffrey, the Postal spokesperson, said USPS has worked hard to answer concerns the public has had about contract employees. Contract letter carriers will be licensed and bonded, he said, will wear uniforms and a postal ID, and go through a criminal background check.

In the final analysis, USPS decisions to contract out are supposed to be justified by cost savings. NALC disputes the notion that contracting saves money, but that's the rationale offered by Postmaster Lee, who forecast USPS will save \$33,878 a year by assigning Arbor Parc to a contractor. Lee didn't return calls, and Jeffrey said he didn't know how the figure was arrived at. Hansen has demanded to know what the figure is based on, but so far hasn't been given the information.

Stopping privatization is important enough to NALC that the union agreed in recent contract negotiations to accept a more modest health benefit in exchange for a pledge not to contract out existing city carrier work. The postmaster general seemed to agree, but the Board of Governors rejected the deal, and the two sides then declared impasse. Under the rules for postal employee contract bargaining, the next phase will be mediation, followed by binding arbitration if no agreement is reached.

Since then, union leaders say, there's been a ramp-up in contracting out around the country, with managers trained and given manuals that specify how to contract out.

"We believe there's pressure being put on Postal Service management by the Board of Governors, a Board dominated by Bush appointees," said NALC national spokesperson Drew Von Bergen. "These people are unabashedly for privatization of the postal service, and if they can't do it in whole, they'll do it in parts."

In a nutshell, Hansen says, politicians are interfering with effective postal management. "That's why we're going to the court of public opinion with a picket. We need the public to know what's going on."

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