

Senate Votes to Approve Postal Reform Measure

Conference Committee Will Decide Fate of Key Provisions

The Senate approved a postal reform bill by “unanimous consent” Feb. 9, taking reorganization of the USPS one step closer to reality. Before the legislation can be sent to President Bush, however, a conference committee must be formed to resolve differences between the Senate bill (S. 662) and a similar measure (H.R. 22) approved by the House of Representatives last summer.

Because they would make the federal budget deficit appear larger under federal accounting rules, the White House opposes two key features of the House and Senate bills. The president has threatened to veto legislation that includes them.

The future of the provisions, which are among the few that were embraced by all the major stakeholders in the postal reform debate, is uncertain. Supporters include postal unions, major business mailers, and the USPS.

One provision would release from escrow approximately \$3 billion the USPS saved by ending overpayments to the Civil Service Retirement System; the other would return military retirement-benefit obligations to the U.S. Treasury. No other federal agency is required to pay these costs.

The conference committee members will decide the fate of these and other contentious issues, perhaps behind closed doors.

“Our struggle now moves to a new stage,” said APWU President William Burrus. “A lot of mischief can be made in

conference committees. We must be extremely vigilant.”

Published reports indicate that Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), chairwoman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, is willing to consider changes to accommodate concerns about the effect on the federal budget.

“Without these provisions, the bills are worthless,” Burrus said. “They are the saving grace of the proposed legislation.”

In a Jan. 25 update to local and state leaders, Burrus reiterated the union’s long-standing opposition to other stipulations that would “give excessive authority to a Postal Regulatory Board and that would reduce Workers’ Compensation benefits.”

Once the conference committee reconciles the House and Senate versions, the bill will be returned to both chambers for another vote.

Senators who will serve on the joint committee are Collins and fellow Republicans Ted Stevens (AK), George Voinovich (OH), Norm Coleman (MN), and Bob Bennett (UT), and Democrats Joe Lieberman (CT), Tom Carper (DE), and Dan Akaka (HI).

The House conferees have not yet been named and no date has been set for the first meeting of the House-Senate committee.

Not the First Trip Up ‘The Hill’ for Reform

The U.S. Postal Service was last overhauled in 1970, with passage of the Postal Reorganization Act. The law creating the federal agency (formerly the Post Office Department) gave postal workers the right to bargain collectively with their employer over wages, benefits, and working conditions.

In the last 35 years, many attempts have been made to restructure the Postal Service. The latest “reform” effort began in December 2002, when President Bush appointed a commission to recommend a wide range of changes to how the USPS operates, serves its customers, and treats

its employees. The commission produced an array of highly objectionable proposals. In July 2003, the commission’s report made proposals for cutting workers’ pay, eliminating the no-layoff clause, restricting collective bargaining, requiring unions to negotiate for healthcare and retirement benefits that are currently guaranteed by law, “outsourcing” more postal jobs, and increasing below-cost postage discounts for the mailing industry.

The APWU helped ensure that such provisions were not included in the legislation now pending before the conference committee.