Testimony of Congressman Albio Sires before the

House Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia

Making Sense of It All: An Examination of USPS' Station and Branch Optimization Initiative and Delivery Route Adjustments

July 30, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify before you today regarding my experiences with a post office closing in my district and the need to properly inform and involve the public in the closing process. To address post office closings, I introduced H.R. 658, the Access to Postal Services Act, which provides a unified and transparent closing process for post offices. This legislation currently has 79 cosponsors.

I am very concerned about USPS' recent announcement to consider the closing of more than 3,000 retail post offices. The Postal Service's financial challenges are significant. The cost of retirees' health benefits combined with declining mail volumes and post office purchases has been devastating to their ability to operate. I understand that these are daunting financial challenges. However, USPS by law is a "basic and fundamental service provided to the people by the Government of the United States." And no amount of financial stress should relieve them of providing a transparent closing process with considerable community involvement.

Post offices – whether it's the main office, branch, station or otherwise – are an important part of our communities. In my district, it took the abrupt closure of a post office station, for me to remember how important these facilities are to many residents and how little USPS considered community involvement.

On December 21, 2007, USPS closed the Lafayette Postal Station in Jersey City with little or no warning to the community and no permanent solution to replace services. Initially, the office was temporarily closed for a security repair, and services were shifted to a post office a mile away. After public outcry a temporary mobile unit was put into operation, it was eventually closed to do security concerns as well.

At this point, USPS initiated the formal closing of the General Lafayette Station, citing safety and security in a high crime area. The public and public officials had little notification throughout this period, and because of a lack of information were obviously displeased at the permanent closing of the facility.

The discontinuation or relocation of postal services creates a hardship for residents and creates outrage when they have no say in the process. The Postal Service stated that nearby facilities about a mile away coupled with online services would be an adequate replacement. However, these suggestions were insufficient to meet the needs of local residents. I represent an urban area and as USPS considers these further closings – mainly targeted at urban areas with other nearby post offices – I am even more concerned about access for constituents.

The term “nearby” really depends on your perspective. Though distances of a mile or more may not seem like much, for senior citizens in the Lafeyette Station area – one mile is a daunting distance, especially when they are already financially strapped and are now forced to take public transportation to access what was once readily available to them.

And I’m not sure how I can relay USPS’ message to use online services, when I’m talking to constituents who are struggling to pay their electric bills – let alone be able to afford access to the internet.

I reached out to USPS during this process – as did Senator Menendez and Senator Lautenberg, members of the New Jersey delegation, and local officials.

USPS gave us incomplete and conflicting information about the closing. And after a belabored and frustrating process, USPS’ actual reason for the closing was made clear – it was not

"security" as they had initially told us, but rather it was simply financial. Closing this urban facility was "cost effective," regardless of its impact on the community.

Now, let me be clear – I'm not blind to USPS' financial concerns. There are certainly times when a post office closing may be reasonable. However, it is beyond frustrating for concerns from the community, public officials, and congressional members to be completely disregarded. More than a year later, myself, two other New Jersey delegation members, and the New Jersey Senators are still waiting for our requested briefing from the Postmaster General to discuss USPS' handling of this closure. If I can't even have my concerns heard, what chance do communities have?

At this point, even if they could get someone to listen – there are no remedies available for them. Currently we have a dual-closure process for post offices. For the main post offices, we have a statutorily mandated closing process that requires public comment and allows for an appeal of the decision. For all other post offices – such as the one in my district and the post offices being considered for closures – there is only an ambiguous USPS regulation that has no right to appeal and requires no public involvement.

This dual system is confusing and frustrating and leaves communities without a proper voice. The vast majority of problems with post offices closings could be avoided with a uniform, transparent system and increased community involvement, which is why I introduced the H.R. 658, the Access to Postal Services Act.

H.R. 658 eliminates the dual-closing system. Instead this legislation applies the statutory closing and appeals process that already exists for main post offices, and expands it to include closings of post office branches, stations, and other USPS-operated retail postal facilities. Essentially for USPS to close a post office, they must follow what Congress has already determined is a reasonable closing process.

Additionally, the bill expands the public notification process by requiring USPS to notify both public officials and customers at each step of the closing process through postings, mailers, and newspapers. It also increases the public comment period to 90 days. Finally, in the event a post office is closed, it requires USPS to notify the public of its right to appeal the decision.

H.R. 658 also addresses the factors used to close a post office. Current code requires USPS to consider a number of factors during post office closings – such as the impact on employees, cost savings, customer access, etc. In my experience, the cost savings dictate USPS' decisions. Given their current financial situation, I'm sure this is the case.

For this reason, H.R. 658 removes economic savings to USPS as a consideration for closing a post office. Obviously, I do know that economic concerns play a part in determining the effectiveness of a station, but I believe it should be a limited factor rather than the primary factor.

While you move forward with the rest of the hearing and discuss USPS' plan to close more post offices, I ask that you focus on communities and how they are affected in this process. Cost savings are important, but so is providing this fundamental service to our constituents and ensuring that their voices are heard in the process. In my opinion, USPS has failed and continues to fail in this regard. Post offices are personal to our communities and the communities themselves understand better than anyone where services are most critical.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.