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Postal Regulatory Commissioner Invites Dialogue

The Alliance is pleased to publish the following article by Postal Regulatory Commissioner Mark Acton, who was appointed by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the United States Senate in 2006. The opinions expressed here are his individual views and do not represent an official position by the Postal Regulatory Commission.

CONJURING CONVERSATION AND CONSENSUS -- A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

A mere three years following the passage of sweeping postal reform, the nation's lawmakers and postal interests are beginning reform discussions anew. Although we have been down this road before, this time there are fundamental differences. The movement that produced the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act lasted more than a decade. The current discussion will not enjoy the luxury of a comparable pace. The crisis at hand today is far less theoretical. We are not talking about the distant impact of technological change, but instead the immediate effects of an historic and crippling collapse in mail volume and the rapidly sinking financial fortunes of the United States Postal Service.

The urgency of the moment is reflected clearly in calls for a national conversation concerning the future of the mail issued by both Postmaster General John Potter, and Postal Regulatory Commission Chairman Ruth Goldway. For members of the postal community wanting to play a pivotal role in shaping any upcoming round of reform, the time for action is here.

The growing urgency of the situation already has produced an outpouring of news articles, opinion pieces, speeches, presentations and papers. Not surprisingly, there appears to be no shortage of interest or ideas. For example, check out the information gathered at www.postaljournal.com. This is all to the good. The challenge before us demands the best ideas, research, data, and thinking we can collectively muster.

Ultimately the current debate will end just as the prior postal reform effort did. Congress will have the last word. And then Congress will act. We again may see stopgap legislation to avoid an imminent fiscal meltdown, but, I believe, the odds are that more significant changes are in the offing. Congress can enact these reforms with the benefit of clear guidance from postal stakeholders or despite the lack of it. What will make the difference?

In compelling remarks at the National Press Club last October, Postmaster General Potter identified a likely key driver: the development of consensus within the postal community. If the many voices in the conversation become one, it is more certain they will be heard with power and clarity. If parties remain apart, clinging either to disparate viewpoints or parochial interests, it squarely will be up to the Congress to sort things out as it deems best.

In either instance, one need seems sure: the dialogue must focus quickly by establishing strong factually based arguments supported by solid data. Proven data informs sound judgment, and proper data development requires a mandate, time, resources and expertise. If there is a new reality or a clear lesson, it must be spelled out and supported with justifiable data. Give and take is never easy, but it is manageable when reason tempers self interest and logic is bolstered by documentation. The postal community as a whole should benefit from those who have done their homework. Ideally, their hard work will lay the groundwork to promote consensus; but even falling short of that goal, it can provide an evidentiary record and reliable guidance for the deciding dialogue that will take place on the Hill.

The Postmaster General has publicly affirmed his belief that no single group can dominate this national discourse. His is a commendable and rather remarkable view coming from the leader of the very organization at the center of the debate and with arguably the greatest stake in the outcome. But equality of opportunity should not be misused as a pardon to avoid bringing structure to the table. As Yankee catcher Yogi Berra once lamented, “It was impossible to get a conversation going; everybody was talking too much.” Even a trained chorus requires a seasoned director. Perhaps this exchange may benefit from the engagement of an experienced independent facilitator practiced in bridging differences and moving matters beyond individual positions to cooperative outcome – a role in which this Commission has endeavored for nearly four decades. Stakeholders themselves will have to judge whether the conversation is moving forward or whether it is merely a platform for competing voices to make their positions known.

We all have been down this road before. That does not mean we have to end up at the same place. Time, as the saying goes, is truly of the essence. For postal stakeholders, now is the time to influence the path to be taken by forging agreement on the destination and crafting a clear roadmap toward getting there.

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