Postal Service tests Flat Sequencing System

In June, the Postal Service completed a two month test of a prototype Flat Sequencing System (FSS) at the Mail Processing Annex in Indianapolis. During the trial period, the NALC had the opportunity to observe the machine's operation as well as visit with letter carriers who were testing the delivery of FSS-sorted mail in nearby Carmel, Indiana on both curbline and park-and-loop routes.

The goal of FSS is to automatically sort flat mail into delivery point sequence with an aim to significantly cut back on the amount of time a letter carrier needs to spend in the office casing mail. But despite management's dreams of immediate time savings, it's almost guaranteed there will instead be increases in street time when FSS is first implemented. Letter carriers need only consider the rocky track record of the decade-old DPS system for letter mail to get a sense for just how much total time they might realistically be expected to save with FSS.

The Flat Sequencing System is one of the latest developments in the Postal Service's long-term Corporate Automation Plan adopted in 1989. Military and high-tech contractor Northrop Grumman, which has a long-standing relationship with the Postal Service for developing automation systems, won a $1.5 million dollar contract to develop a flat mail sorting system. After testing the prototype in their own facilities last year, Northrop Grumman engineers worked with the Postal Service to install the equipment—half a football field long—at the Indianapolis processing facility. The "live" system test ran April 10 through June 10.

During the test, some letter carriers were badgered by supervisors who couldn't—or chose not to—understand why testing the handling and delivery of an additional bundle would have any impact on the street time estimates spit out by the problem-plagued Delivery Operations Information System (DOIS). While the abuse caused some level of discontent, letter carriers still managed to offer some valuable input regarding their safety and efficiency concerns during the test.

The Postal Service also used the trial to identify several issues that mailers and the USPS will need to consider if they want FSS to work to their advantage in reducing costs to help hold down postage rates. For example, mailers will need to agree on a standardized location on flats for

NALC Director of City Delivery Fred Rolando (opposite page) is followed by a supervisor as he and Region 6 National Business Agent Pat Carroll (below) visited the Indianapolis suburb of Carmel, Indiana to see first-hand how letter carriers receive and handle mail sorted by the prototype Flat Sequencing System.

non-detachable, legible address labels, and to incorporate a special 11-digit barcode on those labels.

Logistical issues

Now that the test is complete, the FSS prototype will be dismantled and used as a guide for building production models. The test machine used in Indianapolis was 150 feet long by 50 feet wide, considerably smaller than the fully operational model. It is projected to be 260-by-60 feet, giving it a "footprint" more than twice the size of the test model. The final device will have to be bigger to accommodate both the wide range of flat sizes and shapes, and the complicated mechanics involved in flipping, turning and arranging flats in walk sequence.

The Postal Service hopes to install the first production machine by next April in one of the few sites currently large enough to handle it—the Dulles Processing and Distribution Center, located near Washington-Dulles International Airport in Sterling, Virginia, about one hour west of Washington, DC.

Finding facilities large enough for FSS once it's rolled out—or expanding current sites so it will fit—could place an additional financial and logistical burden on the Postal Service. Also, the Service will be forced to completely overhaul mail flow into, within, and out of an FSS facility—from the drop point on the loading dock to the moment it hits a letter carrier's satchel. Nevertheless, USPS hopes to begin actual system deployment to a limited but unspecified number of facilities starting in 2008.

Meanwhile, the NALC plans to take a hard look at the results of the Indianapolis test and determine what day-to-day effect FSS could have on the letter carriers who ultimately will be responsible for handling and delivering its output.

While it may be inevitable that a machine will sequence flats, the NALC will closely monitor the automation system's progress to ensure that the equipment and delivery methods are both safe and contractually compliant. ✉