

Time to invest in the nation's postal infrastructure



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Our union has rightly argued for years that the Postal Service is a vital part of the U.S. economic infrastructure. It is the essential hub of a mailing industry that employs some 7 million American workers—letter carriers, mail handlers and clerks, of course, but also paper industry workers, printers, ad copywriters, magazine employees, e-commerce staff and every other worker employed by companies that help move the mail or use the mail. Thanks to our role during the pandemic—and especially during the 2020 election cycle, when half of all Americans voted on mail ballots—many in Washington have come to recognize the value of our nation's

postal infrastructure as well. And they are eager to invest in it. Indeed, President Biden's Build Back Better plan includes some \$7 billion to modernize the Postal Service's vehicle fleet—part of a larger program to electrify the federal government's fleet. The idea is to spur the development of electric vehicles more broadly, both to create new jobs and to combat climate change.

The Postal Service long has been an incubator of new industries and innovation. The Post Office helped spur the expansion of railroads in the 19th century and the creation of air transport services in the 20th century by using these emerging technologies to transport mail. And this role is not just ancient history; without the Postal Service, today's e-commerce giants like Amazon, Netflix and eBay would not have been possible. In view of our crucial role, the proposed investment in postal vehicles in the infrastructure legislation now pending before Congress makes good sense. Even so, getting the legislation through a politically polarized Congress is proving to be anything but easy.

The president's infrastructure agenda is divided between two bills: a \$1 trillion bipartisan traditional infrastructure plan (roads, bridges, etc.) that has already passed the Senate, and a broader \$3.5 trillion bill that would combat climate change by modernizing our national energy infrastructure. It also would improve the American labor market for working families by providing tax cuts and support for paid leave and child care, and by making community college and trades education tuition-free.

Unfortunately, the second bill, which includes the vehicle money for the USPS, has little to no support from congressional Republicans. It is therefore being advanced through Congress by the majority Democrats using a complicated process known

as budget reconciliation. This process, which the Republicans used to enact a huge tax cut tilted toward corporations and the wealthy in 2017, allows the majority party in Congress to enact budget policies without having to overcome a Senate filibuster. (See this column in the August *Postal Record* and pages 7-8 of the September issue.)

With small majorities and few votes to spare, congressional Democrats have been haggling among themselves for weeks over the exact contents of the reconciliation bill. As the saying goes, people with weak stomachs should not observe the making of sausages or legislation.

Opponents of the reconciliation bill cite its high cost and concerns about the already-high national debt. By any measure, \$3.5 trillion is a *lot* of money. But the Build Back Better plan should be kept in context—it will be rolled out over 10 years and will cost just 1.2 percent of our gross national product over the next decade. It's a big, ambitious program, but it is not the New Deal. And the president's plan aims to pay for the spending without new debt by repealing some of the 2017 tax cuts for large corporations and the wealthy—and by freeing up other resources by finally allowing the Medicare program to reduce the cost of prescription drugs through direct negotiations with pharmaceutical companies.

As we go to press this month, congressional leaders appear to be debating ways to reduce the cost of the plan. We hope that will not jeopardize the proposed investment in postal vehicles.

The good news for city letter carriers is that new vehicles are coming soon, regardless of what happens in Congress this fall—a procurement contract has been signed to build 165,000 vehicles, the first of which will arrive in 2023.

The USPS Board of Governors and the postmaster general structured the Next Generation Delivery Vehicle (NGDV) contract to allow for either gas or electric engines, and the Postal Service's Delivering for America strategic plan vowed to maximize the percentage of postal vehicles with electric engines if Congress provides financial support for the new vehicle fleet. Such a transition to electric vehicles is not just good for the climate, it is essential for the Postal Service to compete with Amazon, FedEx and other delivery firms that have committed to deploying 100 percent electric vehicles by 2030. The NGDV fleet must first and foremost meet our needs in the Postal Service. But it must also meet the needs of the next generation of postal customers—who will increasingly demand emission-free delivery services.

Given that up-front costs for charging stations that make electric vehicles are higher in the short term, only 10 percent of the first 55,000 vehicles ordered by the Postal Service are currently scheduled to use electric engines. But there still is time to increase that percentage. Congress can make that happen by retaining funds for postal vehicles in the budget reconciliation bill now being cobbled together in Washington.