

Postmaster Says Documentation Proves Service Getting Better

BY SUSAN USHER

Shallotte Postmaster Frank Bringoli takes it personally when he hears customers complain that local post office service has gotten worse since his arrival in January.

"We know better and we have the documentation to prove it," he says. "The mail is up earlier, it is delivered earlier and we are delivering more mail earlier than ever before."

Bringoli says the latest first class and priority mail goes into post office boxes is 11 a.m., and that's only after a holiday. Otherwise it's usually up by 10 a.m. unless there's a delay beyond the local staff's control—such as a late-arriving mail truck.

Sorting continues throughout the day, with parcels up next, then finally third class mail.

"If they come into the post office at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and hear somebody sorting mail in back, that's what they're sorting—bulk business mail. It's not first class mail they're working on."

"I'm tired of reading about people getting their pension checks two or three days late since this (South Brunswick) office opened. It's simply not true."

Bringoli says—with clerks like Kathleen Henderson Heath nodding her head in concurrence—that this wasn't always the case prior to his arrival, that first class mail was seldom up until mid-afternoon. If first-class mail was in the box at 9 a.m., it was typically mail from the previous day, he said.

Mail put in the "local" slot before 8 a.m. in the Shallotte post office should be delivered that same day in



TWELVE to 15 customer vehicles parked outside the Shallotte Post Office (in photo at left) on Main Street around 11:30 a.m. Friday, compared to three vehicles parked the same time of day in the much larger parking lot at the South Brunswick Station (at right).



STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN USHER

Shallotte, he said. Mail put in the "local" box at South Brunswick as late as 9 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. should be delivered to customers in the Calabash to Shallotte area that same day.

"Nine thirty, while the carriers are still there, is usually the last time we go through that box," said Bringoli.

Then carriers are out the door to begin their rounds, generally due back at South Brunswick Station by 4:30 p.m.

While staff size hasn't changed proportionally, the volume of mail handled by Shallotte's four regular clerks, four flex clerks and 10 carriers "just keeps going up," the postmaster said.

"They have us staffed for automation. They're saying we'll have automation in 1995, but I'm looking at 1996...and this is 1993."

He's hoping the office will quali-

fy for more help, but there's no guarantee. This particular day Howard Shelton, an Origin-Destination Information System data collector based in Wilmington, is checking one subgroup of mail for volume, timely deliver and class of mail.

"It helps to determine the number of trucks, personnel, etc., they need," said Shelton, who makes similar checks at post offices throughout the area.

Meanwhile, business is up. For the year ending in early September 1992, volume was up 23 percent over the prior year. Since the start of the new postal fiscal year on Sept. 7, Bringoli said mail volume is up 26 percent from the same period a year ago.

While all 2,277 post office boxes at the Shallotte office are rented, only 800 to 900 of the 3,000 boxes at

South Brunswick station have been rented so far.

Route carriers drop off mail for box service at two other locations under the Shallotte Post Office's administration—Calabash, where all 968 boxes are rented, and Ocean Isle Beach, where approximately half of the 288 boxes are taken.

Clerks at the Shallotte office bring in an average of \$3,000 a day "walk-in" or counter revenue (this doesn't reflect the face value, but the post office revenue from money orders), while the South Brunswick Station typically brings in \$1,700 a day. The two together handle about \$300,000 cash in a weekly accounting period.

Timing may account in part for customers' perceptions of a recent decline in quality of service.

Bringoli's arrival was followed soon after by the already-scheduled opening of the South Brunswick Station, which brought changes in routine for both postal employees and customers.

Carriers and clerks now begin their day at South Brunswick, where there is more space to sort and route mail. As the mail goes up, several clerks move to the Shallotte office.

Rural customers saw changes as well—slips asking them to pick up packages too large for their box not at the Shallotte office as they were accustomed, but at the South Brunswick station.

With no increase in staff and two offices to operate instead of one, Bringoli cut counter service hours and the number of clerks at Shallotte, to the ire of regular customers accustomed to doing business before or after work, or during their lunch break.

Hours have since improved at the Seaside and Shallotte offices and Bringoli expects even more improvement in near future.

Shallotte hours are now 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday. South Brunswick hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to noon Saturday.

"I knew we would be changing the hours back," asserted Bringoli, "but I knew we couldn't do it until we got efficient at moving mail be-

tween two offices. The move was an adjustment for our staff too."

More Improvements Coming

While Postmaster Bringoli says many of the complaints about himself and operation of the local post office have not been justified, the brouhaha caught the attention of the U.S. Postal Service and Congressman Charles G. Rose's office. Changes are in the works as a result. Some are happening now; others will take place next year or later.

Less than two months ago, Mid-Carolinas District officials, Administrative Support Manager Leroy Evans Jr. and Post Office Operations Manager Nearsis T. Harvey pledged that changes would be forthcoming, though certain past decisions won't be undone.

Working on their own initiative without waiting for funding through channels, local mail carriers have moved to improve the appearance of the main post office in Shallotte and to ease parking problems—both of which have drawn customer complaints.

In recent days, said Bringoli, carriers have painted the interior walls, planted flowers out front and erected signs directing customers to additional parking spaces at the rear of the building. The spaces were once used by carriers, all of whom now work out of the more spacious South Brunswick station.

A contractor got the go-ahead Oct. 18 to begin expanding the lobby of the Shallotte Post Office, with the work to be completed by Nov. 18, Bringoli said.

"Once the lobby is expanded, customers will see me or Judy (Horne, supervisor of customer service) up there more and more every day, after we have a real office again," said Bringoli. "One or the other of us is there some now every day, but we will be there more of the afternoon."

Clerks are also working to make box delivery at Shallotte more accurate, surveying customers to find out exactly who should be receiving mail in each box—not always an easy task, said clerk Kathleen Henderson Heath, because customers occasionally leave off a name that should be on the list, and don't realize it until an important

piece of mail, such as Food Stamps or a pension check, doesn't get delivered.

"Is the person in that box? If you put the mail in there then they're not there. If you don't, they are there. There's no in between."

Even with better identification, customers may still get someone else's mail "occasionally," typically a sorting error—mail that belongs to someone with a box to one side or the other of your box. "If you look at their (sorting) cases you can see how it can be misrouted, especially as fast as they're sorting," said Bringoli.

Bringoli anticipates extending window hours in conjunction with a scheduled change in mail departure times.

Currently outgoing mail trucks leave Shallotte post office at 2 p.m. and 4:15 p.m. (a third truck leaves here at noon Mondays and the day after a holiday), and South Brunswick station at 2:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. only. That last departure dictates closing hours for counter service, Bringoli said, because any transactions after the truck leaves become part of the next day's business.

"By the time we get the dates changed, it's already 5 o'clock," he said.

Bringoli said he plans to extend customer service hours later into the afternoon without cutting hours earlier in the day, once the outgoing mail schedule changes.

"We'll extend our hours the same week the truck schedule changes," said Bringoli. That should happen "whenever it is" that the U.S. Postal Service renegotiates its contracts with mail truck drivers during the first half of 1994.

Then the last load of outgoing mail should leave here at 5:45 p.m.

Bringoli is convinced that most of the people he hears from are those with minor problems. He'd rather hear from those he suspects have "real" problems with their mail delivery.

"Some of the problems, I can't fix," Bringoli concluded. "I'm as frustrated about those as my customers are. We do it as efficiently as we can with the resources the postal service gives us to do it with."

Most Mail Gets Delivered Even With Wrong Address—Postmaster

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its load parcels and third class mail, typically arrives around 8 a.m. On this particular day, when the load happens to include Food Stamps—it's nearly 30 minutes late, delayed by the head-on collision of two cars on U.S. 17 south of Shallotte and the ensuing traffic snarl. The delay put mail sorting by clerks and carriers behind, though Bringoli adds, "We'll make up the lost time, or most of it, by the end of the day."

Between the arrival of the two trucks and after the clerks have sorted enough mail to get them started, 10 carriers begin their day. Taking the mail that has been sorted by route, they begin sorting it by order of delivery. As each finishes a lot of mail, another awaits his or her attention.

Robbie Gurganus, carrier for Route 9, typically handles 1,000 to 2,000 pieces of mail a day, for 430 boxes distributed over a 47-mile route. "I've got a pretty small route," he says. "Some, like Route 1, 3 or 7, handle as much as 3,000 pieces a day on a longer route."

Ten carriers serve the area that covers just east of Shallotte to Calabash and the state line and back up to the Columbus County line. Several, like Rita Hawes' Route 6, are "overburdened," very large routes in terms of a combination of mail volume, distance traveled and number of boxes.

"We try to get them some help," said Bringoli. Typically an experienced clerk can sort up to 8 to 10

feet of mail an hour.

Non-letter mail is organized as "flats," and letter mail by tray, with some of it presorted by automation at the regional center. But because of the error rate, clerks at the local office typically recheck it because the mail isn't always "broken down" (sorted) properly. Mail presorted for the Shallotte post office boxes typically goes on to Shallotte on the first mail truck.

The mail is measured by the foot instead of by the number of items, but typically a flat. On a typical day the office may handle 72 feet of letter mail (approximately 250 letters per foot) and 86 feet of flats (approximately 115 flats to a foot). It varies though, with mail typically heaviest on Monday, and lightest on Tuesday.

On a typical day the carriers are ready to head out the door shortly after 9:30 a.m., when "local" incoming mail boxes are checked for the last time that morning.

When that first mail truck leaves South Brunswick station, it carries mail already sorted for customer boxes, to be dropped off at the main post office 10 miles away in Shallotte. Soon afterward a clerk arrives to begin putting that first load of mail up in the boxes. At 9 a.m., a half-hour later than at Seaside, the office opens for counter service.

"The public should be very happy with the staff we have here. Without the people we have, we would have more problems than we do," said Bringoli.

Bonds Would Mean Allied Health Building For BCC

(Continued From Page 1-A)

matched," it has already paid for a larger share of construction on the BCC campus than the state.

However, there would be some increased local cost should the Allied Health facility be constructed. Brunswick County would have to increase the money it spends for BCC on operations and maintenance.

If Bond Issue Fails

What happens here if the statewide bond referendum fails?

Reaves says BCC would be left with several less-attractive choices: "It would force us to go to the county commissioners and request the money for another building. If we don't get it, there will be no new programs for a long time and we will have to put some caps on numbers."

"The worst thing that could happen to us is a sense of apathy, if people think it's a good idea but don't go out and vote."

—Michael Reaves

"I've talked to a number of local officials, and they realize that if it were not for this bond issue, they would be faced with the full construction costs," said Robert W. Scott, president of the North Carolina Community College System. "That is why they support the community college bonds."

Reaves characterizes a vote for

the bond issue as not a vote for higher taxes or wasteful spending, but a conservative investment in the state's future that will lead to economic growth and greater opportunities not only locally, but across the entire region and state.

"This is a wonderful, wonderful opportunity for Brunswick Community College and for this region as a whole," he concluded, noting that Southeastern North Carolina would receive \$100 million-plus for university and community college construction projects if the issue passes.

This is the first time in the 30-year history of the community college system voters have had the opportunity to vote for construction funds.

"It is long overdue," Scott wrote in an article for *North Carolina* magazine. "In fact, if voters approve

the \$250 million, which would fund construction at every campus in the system, the state will be providing more construction money in one fell swoop than it has in the entire history of the community college system." Spending over the past 30 years totals up to \$197 million.

State Treasurer Harlan Boyles, whom Reaves says is known for his conservative fiscal stance, has said he believes there won't be a better time for a major bond issue for years to come. North Carolina has a triple A bond rating, with only 1 percent of the state's revenue base used for debt service, and interest rates are at their lowest point in 10 years.

"The worst thing that could happen to us is a sense of apathy," said Reaves. "If people think it's a good idea but don't go out and vote."

Raindrops To Keep Falling

More rain is in the forecast for the South Brunswick Islands area.

Shallotte Point meteorologist Jackson Canady said he anticipates at least three-quarters of an inch of rainfall over the next few days, which is above average for this time of year.

Temperatures should average near normal, from around 50 degrees at night into the mid-70s during the daytime.

For the period of Oct. 19-25, Canady recorded a high of 86 degrees on Oct. 20 and a nightly low of 49 degrees on Oct. 24.

A daily average high of 78 degrees combined with a nightly average temperature of 59 degrees for a daily average temperature of 59 degrees. Canady said that is about 5 degrees above average. He measured four-one-hundredths of an inch of rain during the period.

Police Suggesting Saturday Halloween

Officials in Shallotte and other local towns are suggesting that children do their Halloween trick-or-treating Saturday night instead of Sunday.

Halloween officially falls on Sunday, but Police Chief Rodney Gause said the mayor and board of aldermen are recommending that people celebrate the holiday Saturday.

Gause said children who go door-to-door for candy and treats should wear bright, reflective clothing and finish as early as possible.

"The later it gets the more dangerous it's going to get with more drunks on the road. The earlier the better," Gause said.

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Where The Profiles Are

Several weeks ago, *The Brunswick Beacon* sent questionnaires to candidates in Brunswick County municipal races, plus two sanitary districts and one hospital board.

Candidates were asked for information about their educational and occupational backgrounds, their leadership experience, their reasons for seeking office, what issues they consider most important, and what characteristics qualify them for public service.

Most candidates responded, but some did not.

The candidate profiles are grouped by race and published throughout this week's edition. When candidates submitted photographs or had their pictures taken at the *Beacon* office, the pictures are published with the profiles.

Here's where to find the profiles:

- Belville.....16C
- Boiling Spring Lakes.....11C
- Bolivia.....11C
- Calabash.....12A
- Caswell Beach.....16C
- Dosher Hospital.....11C
- Holden Beach.....7A
- Leland.....9B
- Leland San. Dist.....9B
- Long Beach.....15C
- Navassa.....11C
- Northwest.....16C
- Ocean Isle Beach.....10A
- Sandy Creek.....11C
- Shallotte.....12A
- Southport.....15C
- Sunset Beach.....11A
- Varnantown.....10B
- Yaupon Beach.....16C