



Secretary of State
DEBRA BOWEN
State of California

February 22, 2012

Mr. Patrick R. Donahoe, Postmaster General
United States Postal Service
475 L'Enfant Plaza, SW
Washington, DC 20260-0010

Dear Mr. Donahoe:

As the chief elections official of the nation's largest voting jurisdiction, I strongly urge the United States Postal Service (USPS) to delay shutdown of 252 mail processing centers in the middle of a presidential election year, and instead extend your moratorium set to expire on May 15, for an additional six months, through November 15, 2012. If implemented in the peak of the four-year election cycle, such major reductions in mail service could potentially disenfranchise millions of people who vote by mail.

While I certainly sympathize with the financial challenges faced by the USPS, I do not support a plan that undermines the timely delivery of election materials in the middle of a presidential election year. Pre-election USPS closures would have a devastating impact on democracy. Even as first-class USPS mail volume is dropping, the number of people who rely on the USPS to deliver ballots and other election materials is steadily growing.

In the November 2008 presidential election, 5.7 million Californians – 41.6 percent of those who voted – cast their ballots by mail. That number will likely be higher in 2012 given the continuous rise in vote-by-mail balloting in California.

This is not simply a California issue, though the USPS closure plans would disproportionately affect voters here and in other western states. Nearly five million Californians cast their ballots by mail in the November 2010 election. According to the federal Election Assistance Commission, the following states had the next largest numbers of vote-by-mail voters in November 2010:

- Washington 2.50 million
- Oregon 1.48 million
- Colorado 1.26 million
- Florida 1.24 million
- Arizona 1.06 million
- Ohio 0.84 million

Recent Closures Evidence of Future Impact

Though the USPS is targeting 15 California processing centers for pre-election closure, your agency has repeatedly stated publicly that the closures will have a minimal impact on first-class mail delivery. In a phone conversation with USPS representatives earlier this month, I was told the current first-class delivery standard is one to three days and, after additional pre-election closures, the standard will be two to three days.

However, the Postal Service's future best hopes do not coincide with the current reality. In 2011, three USPS processing centers were shuttered in California, and in each case vote-by-mail ballots took up to seven days after being mailed to arrive at county elections offices.

- Since a Salinas processing facility closed, Monterey County's mail is now processed 72 miles away in Santa Clara County. The Monterey County registrar of voters reported the USPS change delayed outbound and inbound mail for up to four additional days beyond the two- to three-day delivery promised by the USPS.
- Following an Oxnard processing facility closure, Ventura County's mail is now sent through facilities in Santa Barbara County (35 miles away) or Los Angeles County (50 miles away). This change added up to four days to the two- to three-day delivery promise during a local election last fall.
- Elections mail for Sutter County was going through the nearby Marysville USPS processing center until that facility was shut down. Now, Sutter County's mail goes to a Yolo County facility 46 miles away, and last fall election mail arrived up to four days later than the two- to three-day delivery promised by the USPS.

Closing five times as many California processing centers this year will undoubtedly amplify the challenges for California voters and elections officials, and some scenarios are particularly daunting. For example, the USPS proposes to close a Shasta County processing center before the 2012 statewide elections, meaning Shasta's mail will be processed 161 miles away in Yolo County. Should the USPS close its Eureka processing center, Humboldt County's mail will be sent 190 miles north for processing in Medford, Oregon.

History has shown that voters turn out in greater numbers for presidential elections than for any other election during the four-year cycle. I strongly urge the USPS to heed the lessons of recent California processing center closures rather than continue to assert the next 15 California shutdowns will not have any effect on voters during this presidential election.

Changes in Voting Behavior Take Time

Elections officials and voters have adapted to changes in process and technology in the past, and they can do so again with ample time for planning and outreach. However, the USPS must recognize – indeed, take pride in – the fact that millions of voters rely on participating in their

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democracy by mail. Compounding this fact is the reality that many voters wait until just before Election Day to vote and mail their ballot, and many are unaware of how long a piece of mail may take to travel. This is not hyperbole, rather it is the unfortunate reality that some elections officials have already experienced.

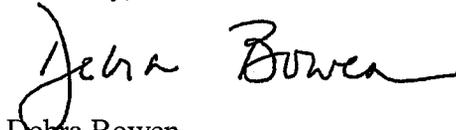
Given the considerable negative impacts that recent smaller-scale disruptions have had on non-presidential elections, I implore you: Do not begin closing down USPS processing centers this close to the 2012 presidential election.

Instead, move the implementation of any proposed closures to a non-presidential election year by extending the USPS moratorium, currently scheduled to be lifted on May 15, 2012, to November 15, 2012. This will give elections officials across the country the time to educate voters about USPS changes in service that could double the time it takes for a vote-by-mail ballot to go from a voter's home to the local elections office.

I look forward to your reply. If I can provide you with additional information or if you would like to discuss this matter further, please contact me at (916) 653-7244.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debra Bowen". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Debra Bowen
California Secretary of State

DB:elg:nw:op