

## Essential Infrastructure: The US Postal Service

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Infrastructure is defined as “the fundamental facilities and systems serving a country, city, or area, as transportation and communication systems, power plants, and schools.” The 1997 report of the President’s Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection described infrastructure as “the foundation for creating the wealth of our nation and our quality of life as a people.”

The United States Postal Service (USPS) white paper “The Postal Service’s Role as Infrastructure” looks at the history and changing demands of the US Postal Service. The very beginnings of our postal service were monarchical, controlled by royalty. “The aim of the [monarchical] enterprise was profit rather than service, and rates were set as high as the market would bear.” According to the report “The framers of both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution provided the national government with postal powers and rejected proposals that the Post Office should be operated as a surplus revenue source in the royal tradition.” According to theusconstitution.org “Although our national charter left many details to be filled in, the Framers recognized that a **postal system** would be essential to unify the nation and encourage the spread of ideas across distant states. Article I, Section 8 authorizes Congress “[t]o establish Post Offices and post Roads.” The article goes on to say “Most importantly, the law subsidized newspaper circulation and allowed for the distribution of newspapers across the country. Notably, scholars have said that this “forged a communications revolution just as far-reaching as the later telegraph and internet revolutions.” Indeed, that is true, as the post office created a central communications system that allowed for a robust exchange of ideas, something that is core to our democracy.”

By expanding road, waterway, railroad, air cargo, telegraph, weather stations, and more, the postal service has played an enormous role in nation building and infrastructure. As we progressed as a nation, the postal service has enabled citizens, rural and urban, to participate in our economic growth.

The USPS is a vital component of doing business in the United States, both by large corporations and by small businesses, farmers, and home-based enterprises. We receive our payments via the U.S. mail, saving clients the expense of much pricier services like UPS and FedEx for letters. The “Click-N-Ship” service the USPS makes possible through its internet portal allows individuals and small businesses the ability to calculate postage, box and label the packages and schedule pick-up without having to stand in long lines. Small businesses like Etsy Stores, eBay sellers, and other virtual selling platforms are made possible in part by these services.

Farmers rely on the USPS to deliver plants and animals. In a quote from a recent New York Times article written by Jack Healy, a Colorado writer who specializes in rural issues, a farmer says “It [the recent changes] pulls one more piece of stability, predictability and reliability from rural America. People don’t like that.” The article points out that checks, plants, replacement parts for farm machinery, and prescriptions are among the infrastructure served by the USPS. Small family farms have relied on the USPS to deliver day-old chicks at a reasonable price in areas underserved by UPS and FedEx. Recently these packages are arriving late, damaged and the precious cargo is arriving dead. These delays in what has historically been a reliable and timely delivery service are affecting the ability of businesses who provide live products like plants and poultry to maintain their good business reputations, and the customers who rely on them.

For the past six months we have been experiencing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our ability to do business, to travel, to shop in person, and to pick up our prescriptions safely in a timely manner. In states such as ours, all citizens are enabled to vote by mail, with documented reliable, trustworthy results. We need, more than ever, to consider the postal service essential infrastructure.

The USPS must operate under conflicting mandates of operating as a business and that of contributing to the public welfare of our nation. "By providing ubiquitous service across the United States, the Postal Service provides more value to mailers big and small, who can be assured that they have access to addresses throughout the nation, than if its service were limited solely to areas where delivery was profitable." (USPS white paper)

The postal service has historically done an excellent job of delivering vast amounts of mail and packages no matter the destination. It has developed technologies, like handwriting recognition tools, that have benefited the nation. It has been a reliable employer of veterans, and of folks in small rural communities. Since the post office already offers money orders (one of the many infrastructure services added over the years) why not add additional services for the U.S. taxpayers who may not have access to internet or other convenient banking services?

If the USPS were to be run strictly as a business, it would have to shut down 2/3 of all small post offices in rural towns across the nation. This would create an even larger divide between the underserved and the 1% wealthiest Americans. The Estes Park Post Office was built in 1961 and is now almost 60 years old. Does it have enough sorting and stocking space for all the packages? Does it have enough loading dock space? Could it be relocated to a location where residents could access it more easily in the heavy traffic of summer months? In my opinion the post office needs to be partially subsidized so it continues to serve small towns and communities across our country. One thing for sure is that we should not be removing mail sorting machines (which assist productivity) right before an election.

The gravity of our actions is critical, as we determine the future of this essential infrastructure.

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