

"The Bland County Messenger"

Ceres Post Office, others could close



By AMANDA EVANS

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Charles and Betty Dix of Crockett have had the same post office box – No. 6 – for as long as they can remember.

Now, however, they might have to turn in their key for a regular plastic mailbox at the end of the driveway.

Last Tuesday, the U.S. Postal Service released a list of almost 3,700 post offices to accompany an announcement that these branches would be under review for possible closure in the upcoming months. The Crockett and Ceres offices in Wythe and Bland counties, respectively, are two of those under review. The move is in response to the economic downturn and the "dire financial situation" the USPS has found itself in, said USPS

spokeswoman Cathy Yarosky.

In the past five years, the mail volume has declined by 43.1 billion pieces, customer visits by 200 million and retail transactions by \$2 billion. Yarosky said she expects a "significant portion" of those on the new list will actually close, but probably not before December. The projected savings, if every one of the 3,653 offices were to close, is \$200 million annually, she said.

But just because a post office is reviewed does not necessarily mean it will close its doors. In January, a list of 1,400 potential closings was released. So far, fewer than 300 have actually closed; 200 that completed the review have remained open. Aspects of the evaluation include considerations about workload, customer demand, nearby post offices and cost-savings measures. And if a post office does close, residents will have the option of rural route delivery or moving their box to a nearby location.

Additionally, reduced hours, no Saturday delivery and other options are being considered. Surveyors for the study will also take the overall effect of the post office on the community and employees into consideration. "Public input is a crucial part of the study," emphasized Yarosky.

Betty Hubble of Ceres plans to make her voice heard. She's begun a petition to keep the Ceres post office open. Since circulating it to friends and neighbors Sunday, Hubble said she's collected more than 60 signatures already. "It would be a total inconvenience not to have a post office," she said. The closest branches to Ceres residents would be Bland or Saltville. "The people in this area really need it."

Of the 60 or so boxes in the office, however, only 18 of them are in use. This low number is typical of small town offices. Across the country, there are more than 3,000 offices that bring in less than \$15,000 annually and more than 9,000 that bring in less than \$40,000. Individually, this is not enough revenue to sustain each office, explained Yarosky. Ultimately, the concept of the post office has changed. "It's not like your traditional brick-and-mortar post office anymore," Yarosky said. "Customers needs have changed rapidly."

She mentioned the growth in popularity of online transactions, even within her own company. There are postal apps for smartphones now, she added. Part of the move to close offices also comes with the expansion of service for "village post offices." VPOs would allow customers to buy stamps, mail regular packages and conduct simple post office transactions through larger retailers such as grocery stores, businesses or town halls. Nationwide, there are already 70,000 large retail stores where customers can buy postal products. The Wytheville Wal-Mart, for example, sells stamps.

But for people who use their local post office every day like Helen Keck, another Ceres resident, it would be a great loss. Keck said she uses it not only for mail, but for informational purposes as well. Where her house sits, she can't see any of her neighbors, so when the power goes out, she calls the post office to see if it has electricity. The bulletin board in the lobby has community news posted. In fact, the post office is part of her daily routine. Around lunch time each day, Keck walks her two golden retrievers down to the post office, about a mile away, to conduct her business. "I would like to see it stay open," she said.

Hubble said she's worried Ceres would lose a part of its community identity if the post office were to close. Henry C. Groseclose, father of the founder of Future Farmers of America, was the first postmaster there in 1881, after all.

Crockett residents seem to feel the same way. "We would hate to lose it," said Betty Dix, who makes a trip there every day. "It's about the only thing we have left in Crockett." The Crockett post office was originally founded in 1874 in the Crockett Depot. "I can understand why they might close it, though," she said. Of the almost 100 boxes in the office, only about 30 are used. "We're going miss it if it is closed," she said.

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Help Save the Ceres Post Office



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