Saturday postal delivery saved; election year cited

By David Lightman and James Rosen, Sacramento Bee

WASHINGTON — Saturday postal delivery could continue for at least two years. And the closing of post offices in smaller communities may not happen as quickly as advertised.

The Senate on Wednesday approved legislation that would slow the U.S. Postal Service's effort to make such changes. By a 62-37 vote, it sent a strong bipartisan message that, though the system is ailing financially, it's not good politics, especially in an election year, to take a scythe to popular parts of the Postal Service.

"We don't allow for what might be called shock therapy for the Postal Service because we don't think it will work," said Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, a Connecticut independent and an architect of the bipartisan bill.

Not everyone agrees, and the plan still has to navigate a difficult road in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives. One proposal by key GOP lawmakers would set up a commission to devise a plan to consolidate and perhaps close certain post offices. The measure would give postal officials the option of ending Saturday service within six months of the bill's enactment.

Many lawmakers in both chambers still see ending Saturday delivery as an important, timely and necessary cost-cutting move.

"It is clear the Postal Service must make drastic changes," argued Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn.

The Postal Service has been struggling, battered by the 2007-09 economic recession and customers' increasing reliance on electronic communication. First-class mail has dropped 25 percent in the last five years. Postal officials have proposed several strategies, including ending Saturday service and studying whether to close about 3,700 of the nation's 31,509 post offices, and consolidate or close 234 of the 431 processing facilities. Many of the targeted post offices are in smaller, more rural areas, and lawmakers from affected states are howling.

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