

Massive undertaking to deliver holiday mail



Letters and packages from Lake Tahoe all go through Reno. Photo/Linda Fine Conaboy

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – It's the busiest mailing day of the year and surprisingly this humming and thrumming place was occupied by seemingly happy people, masters of their powerful conveyors, sorters, forklifts, trucks, and bins and bins of mail, all awaiting their attention.

The Reno Main Post Office on Vassar Street is the U.S. Postal Service's regional hub, where each and every letter, magazine and parcel from as far away as the Oregon border, Northern California, Winnemucca, Carson City, the entire Lake Tahoe region as well as Reno and Sparks is processed.

Overseeing this organized chaos is Michael Sralik II, plant manager, and Karen Little, post office supervisor. Sralik,

most recently from Arizona, has been here about a year, while Little, who's from Colorado, has been on the job two years—both started their careers as letter carriers.

Sralik, who knows each and every facet and cranny of the place, will work practically around the clock during the busy season, with breaks when he dashes home for a quick four-hour nap and returns.



Karen Little, Reno post office supervisor, checks the mail. Photo/Linda Fine Conaboy

He said he's hardly ever in his fairly plush and spacious office. He prefers being on the floor where the action is. The action on Monday night included the processing of a record 420,000 letters and 100,000 packages; nationally, the post office anticipates 612 million packages will fly out the doors of a huge network of postal offices in December.

However, Sralik added, if you think Dec. 14 is busy, wait for Dec. 21, when the anticipated peak delivery crunch will occur. Nationally, the figure this year will soar to 30 million pieces on a single day.

He attributes this phenomenon partly to online services.

"More than 7 million people are expected to use USPS.com," he told *Lake Tahoe News*, adding that events such as Cyber Monday can be extremely beneficial to the post office.

The other employees in Reno work various shifts to keep the 250,000 square foot plant running on a round-the-clock schedule, every day of the year.

To get the job done, across the nation, about 30,000 seasonal workers are hired, while at the Reno facility, 40 people were added to the staff.

At the rear of the facility lies the loading docks where huge 18-wheelers are serviced as well as smaller neighborhood delivery vehicles, all being loaded and unloaded.

In this area too, are numerous plus-sized bins of packages and letters ready to head out of town.

"We fly about 80 percent of our volume by commercial airline," Little said. "We buy tickets for our mail, which is why we ask all of those questions about content when a customer drops off a package."

Because most of the post offices around the lake are smaller and can't accommodate big trucks at their docks multiple trips are made each day.

"For the last three Sundays, we've been transporting there early in the day. South Lake Tahoe got two trucks in two days," he said.

All of this increased activity bodes well for the Postal

Service, Little said. “We’ve seen a 20 to 30 percent increase in package delivery over last year. Maybe it’s the better economy. But we’ve done a good job, so people are coming back to us.”



Routing mail to the appropriate address is an intricate process.
Photo/Linda Fine Conaboy

In addition, Little said the “If it fits, it ships,” slogan advertising flat rate mail has been exceedingly helpful. “It’s a convenience to customers. The carrier gets a notification, knocks on the door or picks up the package off the porch. How much more convenient can that be?” she asked.

Not only does computer automation help the home customer or business, but it’s been a boon to the post office too. Unless they’re oversized and culled from the herd, letters and even parcels are all loaded on conveyor belts, sorted, bar coded and distributed to carriers, all in the blink of a computer’s eye. This process happens for incoming and outgoing mail and

happens to each piece.

Still, there is a downside to post office operations. Enter David Rupert, a corporate communications specialist based in Denver. "We've been self-sufficient since 1972," Rupert said. "Before that we were taxpayer-supported. Over time, we've been required by law to break even and we have, but the last few years, we've struggled.

"We're still losing lots of money because first class mail is down 30 percent over the last six years. Parcels are on the increase, but not making up the difference yet. We welcome this, but we still struggle over decreasing volume. In part, it could be that many people are now paying their bills online," he told *Lake Tahoe News*.

But even the battle to overcome a difficult past record can't dampen the spirits of the crew at Vassar Street. Heck, you'd think that any minute Santa was going to pull up to the loading dock. This is one happy crew, eager to deliver good tidings.

"This is a very choreographed, organized process, believe it or not," Stralik laughed.

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Notes:

Important mailing dates are fast approaching. For a stress-free season remember to mail first class letters by Dec. 19; priority parcels by Dec. 21; and express mail by Dec. 23.