

**Rationale for Direct Defense  
to  
Save the Berkeley Post Office  
and  
the vital public sector of which it's part**

July 25, 2013

On April 22, 2013 the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) approved the "relocation" of Berkeley's Main Post Office and formally announced its plan to sell our historic Post Office building at 2000 Allston Way. On July 18, 2013 Tom A. Samra, Vice President, Facilities for USPS, rejected Berkeley's citizens' and City Council's appeals of that decision. We will not accept this. Under the 1st Amendment to our U.S. Constitution we have the right "peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." We are therefore here on our building's steps to demand that the USPS reverse this decision and instead provide Post Office services in our building at a level commensurate with the needs of our city and especially our downtown. We intend to defend our Post Office building and our right to Post Office services with our physical presence until this demand is met. What is at issue goes beyond both the building and its services: at issue is the rampant privatization of public property and public services, and the lack of accountability of our government to the public.

**Public property**

Our beautiful main Post Office building belongs to all of us. Opened in 1914, it is a crucial element in our city's design around a core of public buildings that also includes among its immediate neighbors our library, our high school, and our City Hall. It was paid for by our ancestors' taxes and left to us so that using our Post Office would be convenient and pleasant, contributing to our civic prosperity and our connection to the nation and the world, its architecture inspiring pride and trust in the U.S. Post Office itself. In 1937, through the New Deal's direct support of public art, the Treasury Relief Art Project, it was decorated with a mural in the main lobby, "Incidents in California History," depicting the earliest inhabitants of Berkeley, and a bas relief on the front of the building, "Post Office Activities", depicting a group of people including a man holding a package addressed "From: D.S. To: All Mankind, Truth Abode on Freedom Road."

The high monetary value of our beautiful and central Post Office building is the acknowledged motive for its proposed sale. However, transfer of its nearly a century's worth of accumulated public value to whatever private buyer happens to have cash now and so can receive pleasure and profit from it is at best desperate bad management and at worst outright theft. Such a sale would not benefit the USPS in the long run; it would cost the USPS an asset and make it dependent on downtown market real estate forces that have destroyed many businesses in Berkeley. The only actual beneficiary of such a sale would be whoever derives wealth from trading in and controlling that downtown real estate, and whoever can afford whatever private use our building might be put to, such as the condominiums, restaurants, wineries and hotels other historic post offices have been sold off to become.

Our Post Office building belongs to us, and we will not permit it to be either squandered or stolen. It is not for sale.

## Public services

We need the U.S. Post Office. Communication with people in other places is important to not only our prosperity but also our freedom and happiness. Article 1, Section 8, Clause 7 of the U.S. Constitution empowers Congress "to establish Post Offices and Post Roads", and the U.S. Post Office has fulfilled its mission efficiently and securely for over 200 years. Guided by the principles of its Universal Service Obligation (USO), it provides service to all U.S. residents at uniform and affordable rates.

The USPS claims to be experiencing enormous financial "losses" necessitating the sale of our building and other historic Post Office buildings across the country. What such posted "losses" reflect, however, is not any failure of the USPS, including any failure of it to adapt to technological developments affecting its mission, but rather a political assault on it as a public service. Under President Nixon, following a postal worker's strike, the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, signed into law in 1971, reduced the taxpayer-funded, cabinet-level Post Office to the current USPS, a federal agency of the executive branch, operated by an appointed Board of Governors as a business and funded by postage sales. In 1992 President George H.W. Bush issued Executive Order 12803 directing all federal, state and local agencies to maximize "Infrastructure Privatization," leading to the outsourcing of many postal functions; for example, Pitney-Bowes now does most of the mail sorting and wants to do more. Finally, under President George W. Bush, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006, requiring USPS to prefund within ten years all its future health and retirement benefit payments to retirees for the next 75 years, an outrageous requirement not imposed on any other public agency or private enterprise. This is not oversight, let alone management of the Post Office; it is an assault on it.

Through all this, our actual need for a Post Office has not lessened. If it had, FedEx and UPS would not be the profitable enterprises they are, offering similar services to the Post Office, dependent on its infrastructure but not bound by its USO. Package delivery is on the rise. Public internet usage is also on the rise; the Post Office adapted to the invention of the telegraph and telephone, providing those services to the public before they were economically viable as private services, and it could in the same way provide internet services, which now cost upwards of \$30 per month per household, compared to 46¢ per domestic letter. And the simple hand-mailing of sealed letters whose privacy is protected by law has never seemed more important than in this moment of revelation of the extent of government surveillance of other channels of communication, and the complicity of private communications corporations in that surveillance.

From 1911-1967, the Post Office also provided public banking services, as post offices in many countries still do. Restoration of even just basic check cashing services would be an enormous relief to low-income people who for lack of assets or documents or both currently must pay high fees, often in unsafe locations, for such services. In the long run, postal banking could facilitate the direct provision of many public financial services, such as student loans, for example, eliminating the cost of payouts to private shareholders along the way.

Congress remains responsible for our Post Office, with the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform chaired by Darrell Issa (R-CA) overseeing USPS. In the U.S. Senate, Bernie Sanders' (I-VT) bill S316, the Postal Service Protection Act, and in the House of Representatives, Pete de Fazio's (D-OR) companion bill HR 630, would remove current legislative impediments to USPS' provision of both current and imaginable future postal services, including the pre-funded benefits requirement.

These are the measures required to fix USPS' financial situation, not the sale of our Post Office building or others across the country.

## **Public employees**

The assault on the Post Office as a public service is also an assault on the employees who provide those services. From the postal clerks who accept our mail to the letter carriers who deliver it to us, Post Office employees have historically been trusted and reliable public servants. They include a significant number of African-Americans because racial discrimination was prohibited in government hiring long before it was in private hiring. They are effectively unionized.

The prosperity of all of us depends on our having ways to make a secure and decent living doing something useful, as these Post Office employees do. We need more people to have jobs like theirs, not fewer; as a matter of fact, we need many more right in the Berkeley Main Post Office, where understaffing currently produces unconscionable waits for service that squander our time and stress the clerks. Relocation of our Post Office and sale of our building, in jeopardizing the USPS's ability to provide good service, would ultimately jeopardize Post Office jobs as well.

The American Postal Workers' Union opposes the sale of our Post Office building and of others across the country.

## **Public process**

We are supposedly living in a democracy. But anyone who attended the public hearings on February 26, 2013 at the Berkeley City Hall on the USPS's proposal to relocate our Main Post Office and sell our Post Office building saw the flagrant indifference of the USPS to our community's wishes in this matter. Late into the night, in packed chambers, an overflow crowd of residents eloquently and unanimously expressed opposition to the proposal from a kaleidoscope of angles: architectural, historical, social, legal, financial, commercial, political and more. Our Berkeley City Council, which has put enormous effort into the revitalization of the historic downtown area of which our Post Office is a crucial part, unanimously opposed the proposed relocation and sale, and requested a year's suspension of the proposal during which it could work with the USPS to find tenants for any underused portions of the building so as to provide USPS with an income stream to support maintenance of the building and keep its retail windows open.

When in spite of all this the USPS announced its intention to go ahead with the relocation and sale, the Berkeley City Council appealed the decision. Their May 7, 2013 letter of appeal was co-signed by our Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, our State Assemblymember Nancy Skinner, our State Senator Loni Hancock, and our U.S. Congressional Representative Barbara Lee. Withholding support among our elected representatives in government was only our U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, whose husband, Richard Blum, is chairman of the real estate company CBRE, which USPS has contracted with for advice on which post offices to sell and which receives commissions on the sales.

## **Public action**

We hope that legal challenges to USPS' decision and political lobbying for the required legislative changes, all of which are underway, can succeed in saving our Post Office building and others across the country, as well as the services they collectively provide. But such challenges are enormously expensive, and only a very few have access to the resources they require. In a political climate in which our government has through our taxes virtually unlimited resources and power, and is spending those not on the public services for which our taxes are intended but on diversion of our public wealth into private hands, such a fight cannot be a fair one, nor one all who care to can help with. Exercise of the power we have collectively is necessary. That is why we are here defending our Post Office with our physical presence.

## **Public goods**

The same article of the U.S. Constitution that empowers Congress to establish the Post Office empowers it "to lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States." Parks; schools, colleges, and universities; libraries and research institutes; museums and resources for art and science; roads, bridges, ports and airports; ferries, buses and trains; water, gas and electricity services; law and its enforcement; clinics, hospitals and public health and safety services; and of course, communications networks -- all these are examples of public goods which like our Post Office are in important ways inherently shared rather than privately consumed, indirectly enabling us to flourish rather than directly generating a financial profit. They have been built up through public investment over hundreds of years to provide for our general welfare.

It is unacceptable to have the accumulated value of any of them diverted to the private benefit of a few. Over and over again, however, underfunding and the debt that that produces is being used as a mechanism to bring exactly that to pass. All Californians paid for the University of California, for example, but now academically qualified students from California can attend only if they have family money, receive charity, divert time from studying to earn cash, or pay banks an enormous overhead. A single pharmaceutical company can make up a shortfall in a department's operating costs and gain a patent on a discovery dependent on years of institutional investment that would otherwise be knowledge available for the public good.

The proposed relocation of Berkeley's Main Post Office and sale of our Post Office building is thus the locally visible tip of a very big iceberg. In defending our Post Office we are demanding a change of course. Our Post Office is not for sale.

Please join us.

### **For more information go to:**

[www.savethebpo.com](http://www.savethebpo.com)  
[www.savethepostoffice.com](http://www.savethepostoffice.com)  
[www.strike-debt-bay-area.tumblr.com](http://www.strike-debt-bay-area.tumblr.com)

- Direct Defense Action Team  
to Save the Berkeley Post Office  
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