

Testimony Before the President's Commission on The Postal Service
Jim Martin
President, 60 Plus Association
Hart Office Building, Rm. 216, 3:45pm, May 28, 2003

Good afternoon. My name is Jim Martin and I'm the President of the 60 Plus Association, a national, 10-year-old nonpartisan seniors group headquartered in Arlington, VA.

60 Plus is one of the fastest growing seniors groups in the country. 60 Plus can now call on support from nearly 4.5 million citizen lobbyists to mail letters to Congress. 60 Plus publishes a newsletter, SENIOR VOICE, and a SCORECARD, bestowing a GUARDIAN OF SENIORS' RIGHTS award on lawmakers in both parties who vote "pro-senior." 60 Plus has been called "an increasingly influential lobbying group for the elderly...".

60 Plus counts among its core issues, the permanent repeal of the so-called "death" tax, working to reform Social Security and Medicare for future generations and finding a way to provide seniors on fixed incomes with prescription drug coverage.

60 Plus spends a lot of time focusing on what seniors all across America are saying, what they're thinking, and what they're doing with the resources they've acquired after years of working, raising families, investing and performing so many services for our country.

One of the irrefutable facts we've learned these past 10 years is, by and large, seniors know what works for them. They eat and drink what tastes good. They prefer certain automobile types to others. They watch certain news programs because – well – because they always have! Their choices in clothing, churches, candy and candidates are all well-reasoned because seniors are well-seasoned. They know what they like. They know what works for them.

And one of the things that has always worked well for seniors is the U.S. Mail. Plunk a stamp onto the corner of an envelope, drop 'er into the mailbox and away she goes. No fuss, no muss.

It's been our experience at 60 Plus that seniors have not yet well-adapted to the information highway. They know of the internet, they just don't much employ it. They see those in their orbit receive emails, they just aren't the ones sending them. I personally don't believe seniors are techno-phobic, they're just somewhat slower adopters of technology. In another generation, we'll likely not have this particular concern ... but for now, the evidence is clear: those below the age of 60 use the computer twice as much as those who are 60 Plus. So say Dept. of Commerce numbers.

The bottom line is that seniors love their mail. They love to send it. They particularly love to receive it. Mail to the crowd that 60 Plus serves is sort of like a well-worn pair of slippers. Snail-mail, as we know the terminology, is a medium that seniors fully embrace.

Let me give you an example. My two favorite seniors on planet earth are my mother – my sainted mom, if you will – who is an active 87. My step dad is a tri-centurion! That's right, full of vim and vinegar at 103, he's lived in three centuries starting in the 19th, September 25, 1899, lived through the 20th and now into the 21st century, and God willing, will soon be 104. Their one constant admonition to their sons, daughters, grandchildren and great grand children is "Write me! For heaven's sake, please write!"

The way I see it – the way I see things as President of the 60 Plus Association – is that seniors like mail as a government service. They seem quite satisfied with the first-class mail delivery they have come to depend on. They seem in no great rush for their mail service to be provided by a more commercialized governmental enterprise. Like those well-worn slippers I mentioned, the mail services they have right now feel *r-e-a-l* good.

And yet, have you visited a remodeled Post Office anytime recently? Why I daresay they feel more like a carnival midway than a trustworthy government institution. The walls are plastered with all sorts of commercial messages hawking premium priced services and non-nostal products like Priority Mail hats and

t-shirts, while seniors are hard pressed to find any important information about how to best utilize “good’ole” first-class mail services.

This sort of thing concerns me. The Postal Service is spending a lot of time, money and wherewithal trying to be what they’re not and will never be. Take for example their huge advertising campaign touting Priority Mail service as a reliable “2-day” delivery service.

We at 60 Plus have serious concerns with that campaign. I believe it’s out and out misleading consumers and in particular seniors, as to the performance and value of Priority Mail as a 2-day service.

The ads claim Priority Mail is comparable to the “other 2-day services” which offer consumers a money-back 2-day delivery guarantee. Well, Priority Mail offers no such delivery guarantee nor does it reliably achieve delivery within two days.

My concern is that seniors may be particularly vulnerable to deceptive advertising practices, especially when the ads are touting a governmental entity that they have come to trust over the years, like the Postal Service. My concerns are further exacerbated by the Postal Service’s ability to run these ads with apparent impunity from consumer protection statutes.

The ads characterize Priority Mail as an expedited 2-day service; however recent reports indicate that more likely, Priority Mail (\$3.85) provides no faster delivery than First-Class Mail (\$.37)!!! That’s just crazy! With many seniors living on modest fixed incomes, coaxing seniors into spending over 10-times more to send an urgent letter via Priority Mail is a particularly egregious failing of the Postal Service’s public responsibilities.

Here’s what I think this committee should give serious thought to:

First, The USPS should focus on its core business. It can do better to serve the public and do better to serve seniors with its letter mail and other monopoly services. In other words, they should “stick to their knitting” and focus on cutting costs, not service.

Second, the USPS should focus on providing a public *service*, not building a *commercial enterprise*. It is not only OK, but desirable to use business acumen to be efficient and cost effective. But in the end USPS is a government agency, not a private business, and therefore must honor its public service functions, such as keeping local post offices open. Providing for such public service functions is the only justification for the monopoly and the mailbox rule. It was supposed to operate in a more businesslike manner when it was reorganized in the 70’s; that may have been intended to help drive efficiency, but we do not see the quality of service as having improved. Seniors remember – this senior surely does – the days when mail was delivered to the door twice daily! Can you imagine no cluster boxes or forcing seniors to walk out to the road in order to get their mail? The times sure have changed! And I’d wager many seniors would love to have twice-a-day door front mail service returned and would even be willing to pay for it as a luxury service. Now that may not happen but you get my point. Frequent to-the-door service for seniors is a big deal.

And thirdly, just as important, if not more so, is keeping rates affordable, a key for seniors. We should not emulate some European post administrations that have gouged their captive consumer – the monopoly user. I find it most disturbing that first-class mail, the class most used by seniors, carries a far greater burden than do other mail classes. It is imperative that the true cost of each class of mail be accurately calculated and be required to carry its fair share of postal overhead. Customers should only have to pay for the cost of providing the services they purchase. Perfecting the current “cost based rate” system is the only way of preventing one class of mailers from subsidizing other classes of mail users. If every mailer pays the cost of the product or service they are purchasing, you achieve a postal service that “breaks even”, as the current USPS is required to do. To ensure that cost based rates are maintained, you need a strong regulatory agency like the current Postal Rate Commission, therefore we urge strengthening the PRC with subpoena power to ensure equitable cost based rates are maintained and perfected.

Finally, I propose that seniors should have a voice on the Postal Board of Governors. There’s both a value and a public service when representation of the full specter of Americana is on that Board – I daresay any Board. I suggest this commission consider recommending the USPS Board include a representative who appreciates the “seniors mindset”, if you will – for indeed, seniors comprise a significant portion of the first class mail population.

All this said, on behalf of those good seniors I am proud to represent at the 60 Plus Association, my time is up. I thank you for yours.

60 Plus is a 10-year-old nonpartisan group with a less government, less taxes approach to seniors' issues. 60 Plus has become one of the fastest growing seniors groups in the country, doubling then tripling its support in the past year. 60 Plus can now call on support from nearly 4.5 million citizen lobbyists to print and mail millions of letters and petitions. 60 Plus publishes a newsletter, SENIOR VOICE, and a SCORECARD, bestowing a GUARDIAN OF SENIORS' RIGHTS award on lawmakers in both parties who vote "pro-senior." 60 Plus has been called "an increasingly influential lobbying group for the elderly... often viewed as the conservative alternative to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)."