

**Statement of Phil Major  
Publisher of the Wise County Messenger**

**Before the Postal Regulatory Commission**

**Field Hearings on United States Postal Service  
6- to 5-Day Proposal  
Docket N2010-1**

**Dallas, TX  
May 17, 2010**

My name is Phil Major. I am the publisher of the twice-weekly Wise County Messenger, a leading community newspaper in North Central Texas, a member of the National Newspaper Association and the Texas Press Association. The Messenger's circulation reaches about 6,000 households and businesses each issue. I appreciate the opportunity provide some thoughts on the Postal Service's proposal to eliminate Saturday mail delivery. We oppose this proposal. I would like to explain why.

My wife, Lesa, and I purchased the Messenger in 2009 from Roy and Jeannine Eaton. I can say without hesitation that it is one of the most recognized newspapers in our state because the Eatons built it into the award-winning, intensely local publication that it is now. I took over this 130 year old newspaper after their 36 years of ownership. I know how critical the paper became to Wise County in those years because I was once their sports editor and editor.

My own commitment to community journalism actually began in the fifth grade when I was editor of the Coin and Stamp newsletter at Newton Rayzor Elementary School in Denton. Then, we operated with a high-powered printing operation—we published on a mimeograph machine. I was later news editor for my high school paper, the Horseshoe.

After graduating with a bachelor of arts in history at the University of Texas, I returned to journalism as a general assignment reporter for the Bowie News. I've been managing editor of several award winning newspapers around the state.

We publishers and editors who own and operate community newspapers become deeply involved in our communities.

When I was first with the Messenger, I also served with the Wise County Planning and Steering Committee, and was editor of the newsletter for the Decatur Lions Club. When I was an editor in Duncanville, TX, I served on the Duncanville Independent School District discipline and strategic planning committees. When my wife and I purchased the Clay County Leader in Henrietta, at the northern border of Texas, I remained deeply committed to community involvement, serving with the Kiwanis Club, the district advisory team for the local schools and the Clay County Extension Service. More recently, I worked with the National Newspaper Association to update a merit badge on journalism for the Boy Scouts.

I provide this recitation of my community work because I hope the Commission will understand that a community newspaper is not just a printed sheet with news and information—although it certainly is that. It is a life-giving force in a community, commanding the personal involvement of its staff, management, and owners in a tight circle of interest with its readers and advertisers. In cities and towns where the local media become cookie-cutter replicas of one another, rather like the Clear Channel model for radio, the communities suffer. Besides the fact that most of us go into this field because we believe in what we do, those of us who own our newspapers also depend upon the community's viability to pay our own bills. I assure you that there is nothing like having your own skin in the game to keep your attention focused on what's important. And what's important in Wise County is the quality of schools, the involvement of local

churches and community groups and rigorous debate on local government and politics.

I was deeply disappointed last summer to read that the Postmaster General of the United States had proposed to end Saturday mail delivery. I am here today to urge this Commission to recommend against such a change in our nation's mail service. I believe that move at this sensitive time in the world of communications would remove a critical channel for information for many. It would particularly damage our newspaper, the Messenger. I also think it would damage the brand and reputation of the United States Postal Service.

We spent \$283,000 last year on postage, which includes postage for our weekly Total Market Coverage publication with 22,000 circulation, which is mailed at the enhanced carrier route standard rate. We transport our mail to seven local post offices, using the privilege of exceptional dispatch for our regular editions to make sure the newspapers reach their destinations on time.

Our mail is highly presorted—carrier route bundles that are sequenced in delivery order for the carriers. We use Interlink software, a PAVE-certified program, to ensure that we are up to date with carrier routes. We distribute the first edition of the Messenger on Wednesday and on Saturday we publish the weekend edition.

That weekend edition began in 1984. It provides people with a lot of material that we could not replicate if we published on a Friday or a Monday. It gives our advertisers the opportunity to offer late-breaking sales updates. Our local churches can publish their service times and sermon topics. And, I understand, Madame Chairman, that you made reference in a recent Senate hearing to another element of Saturday publishing in Texas: the Friday night youth sports scores. People may laugh at the notion that we need to deliver on Saturday so people can find out how the football team did the night before. I hesitate to mention to a Commission from Washington that we in Texas take our football

seriously, because I've heard that most people in DC have two favorite teams—the Redskins and whoever is playing the Cowboys. But the fact is that the sports teams mean more than scores. They provide, in small town America, the first place for the community to get together to celebrate the end of a work week and the chance to return to home and family. The stories appearing in the newspaper the next day are read just as avidly by those who came to the game as those who did not.

I understand the Postal Service's deep dilemma in an era of falling first class mail volume. It must make changes, but if it accomplishes them by cutting critical services, it will sever its ties to so many people and businesses that it may simply accelerate its own downward spiral. Certainly, the Messenger may sadly fall into the numbers that help our local advertisers and readers to escape the mail stream. If we lose our Saturday mail delivery, our newspapers will be out of the mail stream.

We also will rely more heavily upon our web site. I hope you will have a chance to visit [www.wcmessenger.com](http://www.wcmessenger.com). There you will find links to 13 communities around Decatur. You can find blogs, the weather report, obituaries and video. So please understand that we are not Luddites trying to keep the Postal Service locked in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century business so newspapers can keep their old business models. We are on the web, and we will increasingly use it. But it will not replace our newspapers in my lifetime, or yours.

There are three major reasons I believe that to be true.

1. Right now, some of our readers have no Internet access. In Texas overall, nearly 32 percent of the households have no Internet access at all, and only about 57% have broadband. In rural areas, more than 18% of households use dial-up links, which means they certainly aren't going to see our video, and probably are not using the computer for much more

than basic text email. These numbers are the most recent from the National Telecommunications and Information Agency. The state has recently received a federal grant for some broadband upgrading, but that buildout will take a while. And even after broadband reaches most of the state—if it ever does—Internet usage will be limited by culture, habit and household income.

2. Most newspaper readers want a newspaper. They may use the website as an additional channel, but they want the printed paper in their hands. That may be even more true for community papers than for larger newspapers, because people like to clip and save. A computer and desk-jet printer may be able to cut, paste, and print, but people want the newspaper look to send to family and friends. They want the coupons. They want to archive print in a way that web sites do not yet offer.
3. Our website would not exist if it were not for the newspaper. We have web advertisers. But the industry wisdom is that a dollar in print is worth a penny online. Sufficient revenue to support a news gathering operation from a website simply does not exist yet. It may never come to pass. The website is there for the convenience of the readers and because some of our readers prefer the online news. But we could not meet their needs without the print advertisers, many of them using preprinted ads whose revenue is critical to our operation.

I understand the Postal Service has recognized that its proposed changes will affect newspapers. The Postmaster General told Congress recently that it would be some “very rural” newspapers. It is advising publications that depend on the mail simply to change their publication dates.

I have these responses to the Postmaster General’s suggestion.

First, Wise County is not a place I consider “very rural.” We are 37 miles from Fort Worth. In a state like Texas, there are towns like Wink and Muleshoe that

hug the New Mexico border or Cut and Shoot, near Houston, or Hereford in the Panhandle. Those are “very rural.” But, excuse me, Postal Service. Those “very rural” areas deserve service as much as Dallas. In fact, I would venture to say that serving those areas that aren’t reached by other services is the very reason Congress created universal service. People who live in “very rural” areas pay taxes, too, to support those post roads that are mentioned in the Constitution. I don’t think they will much appreciate being part of a footnote in the Postal Service’s delivery decisions.

Second, newspapers do not shift publication dates the way politicians change votes. Our readers look for us on Wednesday and Saturday. Our advertisers have their advertising campaigns designed around this cycle. These are the days they want us to publish. Community organizations that operate with volunteer PR people count on our Friday deadline to get out word of weekend events. Our staffs, small as they are, would be hard pressed to conclude a Wednesday paper on Tuesday and be ready again on Thursday for the weekend edition. We would exhaust them. Finally, our newspaper like most around Texas does not have its own printing operation. We depend upon a neighboring daily newspaper for printing services. We do not have the choice simply to call the press operator and announce that we’ll be sending our file over a day early. Printing presses operate like airlines: they have reserved times, and if you miss them, the press will run on without you. If you want to publish early, you might have to buy the newspaper that already has that printing slot in order to get on that press.

Third, in Texas, even our newspapers with Friday publication dates are concerned about 5 day delivery. We have serious and ongoing service problems in this state. My colleague Roy Robinson, publisher of the Graham Leader, is going to tell you more about Texas newspapers in total, but I can tell you from personal experience that many of our publisher friends complain that the newspaper doesn’t arrive on time once your sortation plan goes beyond the local delivery unit. So a Friday paper in a 5 day mail universe may not reach its

destination until Monday at the earliest, and when we have a Monday holiday, on a Tuesday. That piece of mail is no longer a newspaper. It is a history book. Advertisers will find it of little value, and the newspapers will lose that revenue.

Finally, there will be fallout from this change that goes far beyond the impact upon newspapers. People will drop their credit card payments into a mailbox on Friday evening and think their bill is paid. Most won't figure out until they check their credit score that the payment was delayed two or three days. Small businesses that count on incoming checks on Saturdays will have to wait two more days, and those whose part-time bookkeepers come in to pay bills on Saturdays won't be mailing those payments until Monday. These changes will slow cash flows at a very bad time in this stressed economy.

Madame Chairman, the work this Commission is doing is tremendously important. I understand that blue chip consulting groups like Accenture have examined the Postal Service's operating options. I am not convinced that they have adequately evaluated the amount of business the Postal Service would lose with this change. I fear that they have considered the most readily available data, examined some major mailers and used the Postal Service's projections. I doubt that they considered what the impact on the mail will be in Wise County. Seven small post offices will lose a major mailer. As we develop print delivery alternatives, more local merchants who might use some direct mail will have a new—and I hope better, cheaper—delivery choice. People who discover that their bill payments are missing due dates will migrate even more rapidly to electronic payment, or stop using credit cards altogether. But most important, the (so far false) belief that print is dead—so dead that even the Postal Service is backing away—will take on new credence, and affect all of us who believe in and depend upon all sorts of periodicals, including newspapers. That hurts all of us, but it hurts local readers the most, because there just isn't an economically viable way for them to get the local news...except through us.

We hope, therefore, that this Commission examines alternative ways for the Postal Service to restructure itself, cut its labor costs, streamline its retirement obligations and modernize its retail services. We are not experts in the economics of the mail, but we are experts on doing business in tough times. There is always a way to tighten costs without strangling quality. We hope the Commission will illuminate an enlightened way for Congress as it decides whether to accept the Postal Service's proposal. I thank you for the opportunity to present here, and am happy to provide further information at your request.

Respectfully submitted,

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