

Palaima: A slow erosion of core government services

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It took a trip to Hawaii in 1970 for Joni Mitchell to realize that we let important things slip away without noticing until it is too late. She wrote these lines after looking out from her hotel room window at “beautiful green mountains in the distance.” She then looked down on “a parking lot as far as the eye could see, this blight on paradise.”

Sometimes a long view helps, like Mitchell’s out across natural distance and then down upon the impervious pavement made by and for human machines. In other cases, a view through time helps.

Since the 1980s, I have been watching the dismantling of public services motivated mainly by the idea that government is inefficient or worse. In most cases that I am aware of, the process has been gradual.

Budgets are cut a little at a time or frozen below yearly cost increases. Regulations are changed; legal safeguards removed; institutional structures modified. All this is done in the name of free enterprise. The effects are felt down the line, and they are generally felt by those who had little say in the decisions being made or little grasp of the consequences of those decisions.

You can think of your own examples. In my mind are the steady cutbacks in state funding of public higher education, insufficient appropriations for the long-term maintenance of highway infrastructure, removal of controls over savings and loan institutions, budget cuts for National Public Radio, the Public Broadcasting System

and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the undoing of the safeguards of the Glass-Steagall Act (Banking Act of 1933) through the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (the Financial Services Modernization Act) of 1999.

Front and center in my mind right now is the United States Postal Service, an independent agency of the federal government that was viewed as so important by our founding fathers that the United States Constitution mandates that Congress “establish Post Offices and post Roads.”

Note that the USPS is a vital national “service,” just like our armed services. It is part of a worldwide postal system that is arguably one of the greatest feats of international cooperation the world has ever seen.

In 2006, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act. It mandates that the USPS uniquely set aside from its revenues \$5.5 billion per year for 10 years in order to cover retiree health care 75 years into the future.

So when you read the headlines this last month: “Postal Service crisis persists: The agency has lost \$41 billion since 2007” (Nov. 11) and “U.S. Postal Service cites \$5 billion loss” (Nov. 16), do look at the fine print, do the math and think of the bottom line.

Consider also that in the United Kingdom standard-service first-class letters up to 3.5 ounces cost 96 cents. In Sweden, first class mail up to 0.7 ounces costs 90 cents and then up to 3.5 ounces \$1.80. U.S. postal rates are kept well below such rates: up to one ounce 46 cents; two ounces 66 cents; three ounces 86 cents; 3.5 ounces \$1.06.

Think also of the human beings throughout our country who depend on postal service, like the widow of my late cousin Paul. In 2000, at age 57, Paul, a mechanical engineering grad of Cleveland State University and a Vietnam vet, was laid off from his long-time job as a computer numerical control programmer when the once vibrant industry-based economy of Cleveland was just about finished rusting away. He died in September 2005, feeling thrown away.

Paul's widow, Elizabeth Palaima, mother of their three now grown children, is a high school graduate who admits that she barely made it through her math courses. She writes me simple letters about the daily joys and problems faced by her children and grandchildren in economically blighted Cleveland. She encloses clippings from the newspapers, occasional snapshots and drawings her grandchildren have made. Since May 15, 2011, I have received and kept 198 letters, each mailed from the front porch of her small house and safely delivered to my Austin mailbox for 46 cents each. It is what she can afford and how she stays humanly in touch.

Elizabeth, like many Americans, cannot pay the entrance fee and high toll charges on our electronic information highway. She depends on a service from our government that Abraham Lincoln declared was "of the people, by the people, for the people."