



Naming Post Offices Through Legislation

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Summary

A common form of legislation is the naming of post offices for former Members of Congress or other figures of local or national renown. Approximately one in five of the public laws passed by the 109th Congress was a post office naming bill approved under suspension of the rules. Unanimity of a state's congressional delegation is required for the movement of naming bills to the floor of the House or Senate. The costs of dedicating a post office in the name of an individual are modest, and this action results in no change in public identification of the facility by its geographic location.

This report describes how the practice of naming post offices through public law originated and how it is commonly done today. House and Senate practices for approving such legislation, and procedures followed by the U.S. Postal Service in organizing a dedication ceremony, are also described. This report will be updated early in the 111th Congress.

Legislation naming post offices for individual persons has become the single most common form of legislation if measured by the number of public laws enacted. Ninety-eight of the 482 public laws passed by the 109th Congress, or 20.1%, were post office naming bills.¹ This report briefly recounts the history of the practice of naming post offices for individuals, describes the process currently followed for enacting such bills, and explains how a law changing the name of a post office is implemented by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS).

History

The Post Office Department did not formally address the naming of post offices until 1891. Until then, the names of post offices were derived from a number of sources, including the name of the town or township in which the post office was located, certain neighborhoods, crossroads, local landmarks, and even the postmaster's name or place of residence. On February 18, 1891, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 87 instructed the clerks of post offices nationwide to utilize the post office names published in the bulletins of the United States Board on Geographic Names in naming post offices. The next year, in 1892, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 48 instructed the fourth assistant Postmaster General not to "establish any post office whose proposed name differed from that of the town or village in which it was to be located" in order to avoid confusion, and facilitate the expeditious and efficient delivery of mail.

A search of legislative titles indicates that Congress first recognized an individual by naming a post office through freestanding legislation in his honor in 1967, when P.L. 90-232 named a combined post office and federal office building in Bronx, NY, as the "Charles A. Buckley Post Office and Federal Office Building" in honor of the late Representative Charles A. Buckley, who had chaired the House Public Works Committee through 1964. Courthouses and federal buildings, some no doubt containing postal facilities, had been named before that. The United States Postal Service came into being in 1971 with its own separate real estate authority. Legislation to name USPS facilities was then referred to the House and Senate Post Office and Civil Service Committees, and when these committees were abolished, to the House Oversight and Government Reform and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committees. (Legislation naming courthouses and other federal buildings is referred to the public works committees.)

Postal naming acts were relatively infrequent until recently, averaging 12 per Congress for the 102nd through the 105th Congresses. In the 106th Congress, 50 such bills were passed that named 58 post offices. In the 107th Congress, the number of bills passed declined to 46,² and then practically doubled in the 108th Congress to 89. Retired Members of Congress were honored in 17 of the acts of the 109th Congress. While most of the others appear to be people of local renown, some of the nationally known figures honored in recent years include Ronald Reagan (three times), Bob Hope, Cesar Chavez, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Walt Disney, and Jay Hanna Dean (better known as "Dizzy" Dean). At least 10 of the naming acts recognized the sacrifice of soldiers who died in Iraq.

¹ This report originally was written by L. Nye Stevens, who has retired from CRS.

² In addition, P.L. 107-225 redesignated the Brentwood Road, DC mail processing facility in memory of two employees (Joseph Curseen, Jr. and Thomas Morris, Jr.) who died as a result of anthrax exposure there, and P.L. 107-120 provided for the installation of a plaque to honor Dr. James Harvey Early in the Williamsburg, KY post office.

Procedure

The first step a congressional staff member should consider in preparing a naming bill is the selection of an appropriate post office. Most congressional districts contain many postal facilities, and it often comes as a surprise to congressional staff that USPS does not have a comprehensive list of those that have already been named for individuals, either through legislative or administrative action. However, USPS government relations representatives can determine the status of a particular post office on request. They may also point out that local customers sometimes resent their post office being named for “an outsider” without a strong and favorable local identification. The condition and activity level of the building is also a consideration, since some post offices offer a better presentation than others. While few post offices have been closed in recent years, it is not difficult to foresee that there will be an initiative in the future to close some of those that are less active.

Once a post office has been selected, several key pieces of information are needed for drafting the legislation. One is the precise address of the facility. Another is whether the facility is owned by USPS or (more commonly for smaller post offices) leased from a private owner. In the latter case, the building’s owner should probably be consulted. Finally, a critical step is determining, from the person to be recognized or his or her family, the precise form and spelling of the person’s name. Some public figures use different names for formal and informal purposes.

All but 14 of the 98 naming acts passed in the 109th Congress originated in the House. Wording of the legislation shows little variation. P.L. 108-17, signed by President Bush on April 23, 2003, is typical:

An Act

To designate the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

Section 1. Designation

The facility of the United States Postal Service located at at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, shall be known and designated as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Sec. 2. References

Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in section 1 shall be deemed to be a reference to the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee has a policy (though not a formal rule) that a post office naming bill will not be approved unless and until all Members from the state where the post office is located have signed on as cosponsors of the bill. In recent years, the committee has generally not marked up or otherwise formally approved naming bills in a committee meeting. Rather, committee staff keep a list of naming bills and other measures appropriate for consideration under suspension of the rules, or by unanimous consent, to be taken up when opportunities appear. Negotiations between the majority and minority leaders determine when and how the bills are to be considered on the floor.

Passage by the House has almost always been routine, commonly by voice vote or on a roll call vote that is unanimous. An exception occurred on the House floor on September 27, 2005, when the motion to suspend the rules and pass H.R. 438 was defeated on a 190-215 roll call vote. The bill, which would have designated a post office in Berkeley, California as the Maudelle Shirek Post Office Building, was intended to recognize a community activist and long-time member of the Berkeley City Council. During the debate, opposition was expressed based on her attributed espousal of “principles that would be running contrary to American values.”³

Senate procedures are less regular, and it is not uncommon for naming bills that have passed the House to languish for several months waiting for action by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the full Senate. On June 25, 2003, the Senate considered 14 post office naming bills en bloc and passed them all by unanimous consent without debate. Under both Democratic and Republican leadership in the 107th, 108th, and 109th Congresses, the committee has required that both Senators from a state agree to a naming bill, though formal co-sponsorship is not required.

After the first session of the 109th Congress, the Senate Committee adopted a policy (not a formal rule) that it would no longer consider post office naming bills that honor living persons. The policy became effective on January 1, 2006. Since some bills naming post offices for living persons had been passed by the House, in 2005, and were already before the Senate when the policy came into effect, there was some question whether or not they would fall under the policy. On June 14, 2006, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs ordered 14 postal naming bills to be reported, two of which (H.R. 2977 and H.R. 3549) named post offices for persons still living, one a former Member of the House. At the beginning of the 110th Congress, the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs discontinued this policy.

Dedication

The practical effect of legislation renaming a post office is less than might appear. For operational reasons, post offices retain their geographical designations in the USPS addressing system, and there is no change in the way renamed post offices are identified in the official listing of post offices. The *National Five-Digit ZIP Code and Post Office Directory*, for example, which is widely circulated and available in post office lobbies, does not contain names of individuals for whom certain post offices have been named by law. Nor is there a separate list of named post offices that could be consulted to determine which post offices have been named in law and which have not.

The tangible effect of naming a post office is the installation of a dedicatory plaque in “a prominent place in the facility’s lobby, preferably above the post office boxes.”⁴ The plaque, which is purchased locally at USPS expense running from \$250 to \$500, measures about 11 inches by 14 inches and contains the following inscription:

³ Rep. Steve King, remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol.151 (Sept. 27, 2005), p. H8370.

⁴ USPS Handbook, Administrative Support Manual(ASM), May 2005, p. 276.

THIS BUILDING
IS NAMED IN
HONOR OF

(NAME)

BY ACT OF
CONGRESS
P.L. 109-____
(DATE)

USPS, working with the sponsor of the legislation, may take responsibility for organizing a dedication ceremony. The protocol includes invitations to the honored individual and his or her family, an honor guard, a religious figure for an invocation, media notification, and light refreshments such as cake and punch. Costs for these expenses may be borne by USPS from its contingency funds, or shared with local community interests.

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