

View from Downers Grove
By Elaine Johnson

The case of the missing mailboxes

One by one, they vanished without a trace. Around town, moms trailing toddlers, retirees out for a constitutional, and professionals on their way to work all made the same unwelcome discovery: The neighborhood mailbox was gone.

No formal announcement, no official explanation accompanied the sudden disappearance in recent weeks of mailboxes around town. Just—poof—here today, gone tomorrow. “It was like the Twilight Zone,” said a friend who searched in vain for a mailbox she was sure had to be *somewhere* in the vicinity.

Little did she know how “Twilight Zone” the case of the missing mailbox would become over the next 24 hours, as I attempted to investigate the unceremonial extinction of this neighborhood fixture.

Now, I was a summer mail carrier during college, so I have some idea of the pressures, financial and otherwise, that impact the Postal Service. Still, I haven’t experienced this much of a run-around since I spent six hours a day on the route.

My first call was to the postmaster in Downers Grove. He declined to tell me how many mailboxes had been pulled and offered no explanation except they weren’t collecting enough mail. He did acknowledge one mailbox was reinstated on Woodglen Lane after a number of callers complained. But when he learned his answers might appear in the newspaper, he clammed up completely. When I reminded him the government is often asked routine questions by the press, if not by the taxpayers who support its operations, he told me he would call back later.

Tick-tock, deadline loomed and no call was forthcoming, so I decided to try again. This time, a supervisor answered in the postmaster’s absence. She seemed not to understand his unwillingness to answer questions, but couldn’t offer any information except that some of the missing mailboxes were only getting a handful of mail daily.

When I asked if there was a district supervisor who could answer questions, she referred me to a gentleman at the Naperville Post Office. The woman who answered the call told me he hadn’t worked at that office for months. When pressed for another contact, she condescendingly suggested I give my local postmaster a chance to respond. Postmasters are busy, I was told, and sometimes can’t return phone calls for days.

Call Number Four was to the Consumer Affairs number listed under the Postal Service-Northern Illinois District heading in the phone book. This one was a recorded message referring me to an 800 number that operates 24/7. Not wanting to risk another recording, I dialed the Inspection Services number. A woman there attempted to transfer me to an actual person in Consumer Affairs, but I ended up with a dial tone instead.

Undeterred, I called the 24/7 Consumer Affairs number. I was hopeful when, after listening to a laundry list of options, I finally got through to an operator. She listened politely and referred me to a Springfield-based Consumer Affairs officer—whose voice mail announced she’d be out of the office for the next week.

Happily, her message referred callers to two other postal employees. I got through to the second, but he clearly had no idea why I was calling the Springfield Post Office to get information about missing mailboxes in Downers Grove.

At this point, I gave up trying to weasel information out of the U.S. Postal Service.

I turned instead to a couple I know who made their calls to the postmaster as disgruntled private citizens. They've long patronized the mailbox that sat at the corner of Wallbank and Prairie. They miss it because, unlike the boxes outside the Post Office, this one didn't require dodging kamikaze traffic on Curtiss Street, it had a morning pickup and, best of all, it was north of the tracks. As my friend says, "Who wants to get stuck by five trains just to mail a bill?"

The postmaster told them neighborhood boxes must collect a minimum 25 pieces of mail a day to remain viable. That the decision to pull certain mailboxes was reached after monitoring mail collections for one week. And that 15 complaining callers managed to get the Woodglen mailbox reinstated.

So, for those of you who miss your mailbox, the number to call is 969-2001. And good luck getting an answer.

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