

By Todd Leskanic

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U.S. Reps. Larry Kissell and David Price told a small crowd gathered Monday at the Headquarters Library on Maiden Lane that they are working to prevent the closure of the city's mail processing and distribution center and annex.

Kissell and Price appeared at a town hall meeting organized by the Fayetteville chapter of the American Postal Workers Union. Cumberland County Commissioner Charles Evans and Hoke County Commissioner Ellen McNeill also spoke briefly against the Postal Service's plan to move most of the city's mail processing plant to Charlotte.

Price attributed the move against the Post Office to what he called an anti-labor attitude in Washington and to a pervasive "libertarian" anti-government movement.

"These are the same folks who refer to our public schools as 'government-run schools,' " he said. "The Postal Service is our deliverer of last resort and we have to have it. For those who don't approve of this because of their ideology, too bad for them."

The Postal Service announced in February that it planned to close its Downing Street mail-processing annex and to scale back most of the Green Street distribution center. Many of the 400 or so workers at the plants would be able to keep their jobs, but would have to move to Charlotte to do so.

Linda Whiting, 52, of Raeford, was among the postal workers who attended the town hall meeting. She said she didn't hear anything new but wanted to stay informed on the latest. For her, the idea of moving her life to Charlotte after living and working in the Cumberland County area for more than 25 years is the most unsettling.

"I feel like if I want to move, it should be my decision," she said.

In his brief statement, Kissell told postal workers in the crowd that many sympathized with their anxiety.

"I'm not sure they're looking at the options as closely as they should be," Kissell said, referring to some members of Congress.

Fayetteville's processing plants are among 223 around the country that will lose some or all of their mail-processing operations to other facilities, according to the Postal Service. Mail processing done in Rocky Mount and Kinston would be transferred to Raleigh.

None of the changes would be made until at least May 19, and possibly later. The Postal Service is hoping Congress will act by then to help it deal with the staggering financial difficulties that are forcing the consolidations.

Meanwhile, the consolidations won't be possible at all unless the Postal Service ends its overnight delivery standard for first-class mail. It has proposed doing just that, pushing the delivery standard for first-class mail to two to three days. Officials have said the extra time would be needed if there are fewer facilities handling mail from much larger territories.

The Postal Service has said it's struggling to deal with a dire financial situation that has resulted from the recession, increased use of electronic communications and an obligation to funnel \$5.5 billion a year into funds to cover future retiree health benefits. It says its consolidation plan would cut its operating costs by \$2.6 billion each year.

Tony McKinnon Sr., president of the Fayetteville chapter of the American Postal Workers Union, told attendees to contact their representatives in Congress to let their voices be heard.

"Closing the Fayetteville P&DC is irresponsible and unnecessary," he said.