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W. Phila. post office to remain open

By ALEX DUBILET
January 15, 2004

Citizens and activists of the Belmont area in West Philadelphia won a small but important battle last week when the United States Postal Service reversed its decision to close the post office located at 41st and Lancaster Avenue.



[Allie Abrams-Downey/The Daily Pennsylvanian]

The office had served the community for nearly three decades, but was due to close upon the expiration of its lease this month.

The decision was reached primarily because of the participation and cooperation between three entities -- new Philadelphia Postmaster Henry Dix, Congressman Chaka Fattah and the Lancaster Avenue Business Association, which represented the interests of area residents.

The post office on 41st and Lancaster will remain open as a result of advocacy by community members and U.S. Congressman Chaka Fattah.

The original decision to close the office stemmed from safety concerns arising from poor maintenance of the independently owned building, according to Postal Service spokeswoman Cathy Yarosky.

The lease is now going to be extended on a monthly basis, while some repairs are being made. "It was a safety hazard," Yarosky said. "We are really concerned about the safety of our employees and customers."

But Aisamah Muhammad, chairwoman and CEO of LABA, saw the situation differently.

"There was conflicting information that the building was not well kept. Actually, it turned out that the condition was fine," she said.

"They were assessing the economic feasibility and productivity in the area," she added. "We were not being recognized as a thriving enough community to retain the service."

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Though the U.S. Postal Service had planned the closure for several years, community members were not aware of the proceedings until just recently.

Once they found out, community leaders and organizations fought to keep the post office in the neighborhood.

"We acted on short notice," Muhammad said. "We found out about the original decision in mid-November."

Within a month, petitions were signed, letters sent and community groups organized.

Fattah became aware of the need for the post office in the community, which is currently promoting development along the Lancaster Avenue corridor.

Fattah "saw the need of the post office in the community because there is a lot of development taking place inside," said Bonny Bowser, Fattah's district director.

"Congressman Fattah and his office were instrumental in this decision," Yarosky said.

"We were getting a lot of feedback from the community," Yarosky added, noting that when Dix took office he revised the plan to close the local office quickly.

"This was a service that is needed, and we would rather build upon it, not eliminate it," Muhammad said. "We need to increase the type of service provided and consider a possible relocation to a larger facility," Muhammad said.

Currently, the office does not have post office boxes or mail carriers, but is just a "retail office" that processes outgoing mail and sells postal supplies.

Despite the original disagreements, the sides came together and agreed on a decision that would give the community the opportunity to thrive.

"The last thing we need is to eliminate something that we already have," Muhammad said.

The sides apparently view the situation equally, though the Postal Service has not yet finished its complete review of the office.

"The community was very involved and very pleased with the results," Yarosky said. However, "the Postal Service still has to do a feasibility assessment [to see] whether the facility will remain a productive investment," Muhammad said.

But, at least temporarily, there was a sigh of relief from all sides.

"It's a happy ending and a new beginning for the community," Fattah said in a press release dated Jan. 8.



An official joint statement between Congressman Fattah's office and the U.S. Postal Service in Philadelphia is expected within a week.

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