

DPS Flats, A Look At Our Future

By Roberta A. Clemmer, City Letter Carrier

*(This article first appeared in the May-June 2006 issue of **The Summit City Mailbag**, publication of Summit City Branch No. 116, Fort Wayne, IN, Thom Green, President & editor. With city letter carriers in Fort Wayne asking about more inside information about the initial testing of DPS Flats, I asked Roberta, then a city letter carrier in Carmel, and a former city letter carrier and member of Summit City Branch No. 116, to provide us with a more in-depth discussion of FSS. Her commentary of FSS should give everyone a good idea of what the future holds. An interesting side note. Roberta transferred to Virginia at the start of this year. She thought she would be “escaping” DPS flats, but ironically, her office – Vienna – is scheduled to come on line with the FSS in the next couple of months. To those who wish to use this article in a publication you have my permission as long as you give full credit to the source of this document, and you notify me in advance of your intent to use this article. I can be reached at Zoostew@aol.com. – Thom .) © 2007, **The Summit City Mailbag**, Fort Wayne, IN*

I work in the Carmel, Indiana, Post Office as a city letter carrier. Our office just completed a three month test of FSS (Flat Sequencer Sorter) flats. Huge banners were displayed in our office declaring that we were the first post office in the nation to experience FSS. Carriers familiar with DPS letters will understand the concept of FSS: mail, in this case flat mail, is sorted by machine in delivery sequence for each route, and carriers then take the presorted flats to the street.

Our office has literally swarmed with outsiders (people who work for the USPS or have contracted with USPS but are not part of the regular staff at Carmel) for at least the last 6 months. Some of these people were tweaking the office, making us AMSOP compliant, ordering or suggesting the cleaning and reorganizing of the office, observing day to day operations without actually supervising, suggesting a direction for the flow of employees from clock-in to clock-out. A group of them, once FSS began, observed us, timed us, rode with us, observed us some more, and timed us some more. Although I am not exactly certain of the extent of their authority, I did have the impression that they had a firm hand, if not the final say, in the operations of our office.

Some of the changes have been good, I think: the floor has been cleaned and polished; abandoned equipment that had been stored against walls and in dead zones on the workroom floor, collecting dust for years, has been removed, resulting in more workspace for everyone; city carrier cases were re-aligned, opening up even more floor space; peeling and chipping paint was scraped off, and much of the interior received a new coat of much-needed paint.

We were told that Carmel was chosen as a test site for FSS because we get a lot of mail, especially a lot of flat mail. That may be true. I have worked in other offices, I have friends in other offices, and I know from talking with them and seeing with my own eyes that yes, Carmel does get a lot of mail.

I have wondered, however, if other factors were not considered as well.

1. Carmel's routes are nearly all mounted routes. As difficult and time-consuming as FSS is to handle on the street on a mounted route, it is far more difficult to handle on the street on a walking route. I wonder how the test would have gone had it been conducted in an office of all walking routes.

2. The Carmel Post Office has a good mix of city routes and rural routes. We have 34 city routes and 27 rural routes, I believe, all of which span two zip codes, 46032 and 46033.

3. The Carmel Post Office has no real union presence on the workroom floor. The president and chief steward of the local NALC has been president for many years and retired from the Postal Service before DPS letters came online, so he never even experienced carrying DPS. What more could Postal management hope for than no NALC voice on the floor day in and day out?

As a city carrier who wants to be able to do the job in the most efficient way possible I believe any kind of pre-sortation of the mail is beneficial ***as long as carriers are then allowed to use that presorted mail to prepare our routes for the street.*** I strongly disagree that DPS letters are an *end* rather than a *means*. I understand USPS would like to set up FSS as an end as well. I think both should be treated as a *means to an end*. In other words, we should be able to case them entirely to solidly prepare the route for the street. Business routes, apartment routes, and park&loop (dismount) routes would especially benefit from this. By casing all the mail in the morning for the route we can sort out all hold mail, all forward mail, all missent and missorted mail, and any other irregularities that show up in the mail. In addition, we would be working off one primary bundle as we deliver on the street, which is so much easier and efficient than working off many bundles.

When I shared that vision/proposal with one of the outsiders, telling him how important I think it is that we prepare mail in the office and not be sorting it in an LLV on the street in freezing temps or 117 degree temps or during storms, etc, he replied that this whole FSS plan is simply moving the Postal Service toward the day when there are no Post Office buildings, when "carriers" report to a truck terminal, unload a route off a semi-trailer, load the mail into a vehicle (he didn't say whether this would be a private vehicle or a postal vehicle), and drive away. He said the reason management will not allow city carriers to case DPS or FSS is that the NALC will not budge from the 18 and 8 standard, and in management's eyes, when mail is pre-sorted, as DPS and FSS are, part of the route sorting is done already, and the standards for that mail should be greater.

I spent the rest of the day feeling sick to my stomach. This "goal" of no Post Offices eliminates the very essence of the Postal Service, which is a community presence in every community in this country. Accessibility is so critical to what we do and to what the Postal Service is. Furthermore, this "goal" ignores the very real and still mounting fuel crisis and assumes that Americans will be able to drive tractor-trailers all over this land in the future.

His "no-PO" vision is not a good thing. It is not good for the Postal Service, not good for the people, and not good for the country. Why do I see this but the powers-that-be do not? At a time when the Postal Service is urging carriers to "Connect" with the "Customers," the Postal Service seems to be determined to pull itself away from those same customers.

I hope this man's truck-terminal vision of the USPS is his alone. I would hate to think that postal upper management is seriously considering it.

A city carrier from the East Coast asked some very good questions about FSS online. I tried to answer them as best I could. Bear in mind that these are my thoughts and observations, and not necessarily those of postal management, other carriers in the office, or the editor.

1. How does it come to you? DPS letters come in trays.

The first FSS came to us in deep yellow plastic half trays with built-in black handles, roughly 8 inches deep, 15 inches wide and 13 inches long. These trays were awkward to work out of: they were too deep to comfortably retrieve flats on a mounted route, and because they were only half-trays, we had to replenish our FSS flat mail from the rear of the truck frequently.

The yellow trays gave way to blue plastic trays. The blue trays were full-length, approximately 22 ½ inches long, about 13 inches wide and about 6 ½ inches deep with a slight cutout in the front for better viewing of the address labels on the flats. Still not perfect, if such a thing exists, the blue trays had sharp steel bar ends on the front corners. I don't think anyone was injured by these, but we all had to be careful with them.

On one of the last days of the test period some of the leaders of the program came around with an engineer and a new tray. This tray was all-one-piece molded plastic. They asked us to hold it, asked what we thought of it, asked how we thought it would perform. For me, I wanted to take it out that day---there is nothing like actually using something to see how it works. But that never happened.

So, they are still developing trays. The trays have to be compatible with the FSS machine. It is my understanding the FSS machine is "robotic," loading flats, sorting flats, unloading full trays off of itself onto conveyor belts or something. (They had one night when we could go out to the plant and watch the FSS do its job; I was unable to attend; if you are offered the same opportunity, do everything in your power to go, and encourage

other carriers to go; I think it is important).

2. Are the flats secured in any way or do they tend to flop like NLM flats do?

The flats are not secured, and they flop all over. It is frustrating. DPS letters, which are fairly solid and self-contained and are wider than they are tall, stay fairly organized in the trays. Flats, like catalogs and magazines, on the other hand, are usually solid on the spine side but loose on the "open" side and are taller than they are wide. The loose sides spew out many of the insert cards so notorious in magazines and department store flyers. The very "nature" of flats makes them flop, scoot, slide, and slouch. I think with cased mail the flats stand up better because they are interspersed with letter mail, but even then, as the tray empties, the flats want to scoot down.

If you mean "are they helicoptered" like the flats we often get in tubs, however, no, they are not. Virtually all the flats I removed from the FSS trays had their labels facing me.

You do need to know this, though: the FSS machine at this time can be programmed in one of two ways --- spines to the left *or* spines to the right. It cannot process flats both ways. Flats without spines, such as large envelopes and large postcard-like pieces, are processed any way the powers-that-be want, as long as the labels are on the face of the piece. So, what does the spine issue mean to carriers? Think of catalogs and magazines. Each has a spine. The FSS machine doesn't care where the address label is located on the face of the mailpiece, only where the spine is located. In our office, because the majority of the routes tested were mounted routes, the spines were set to the left, so that as the carrier reached to the tray with his/her left hand to retrieve the mail for a mailbox, the spine would be on the left side. The address labels could be at the top, the bottom, the left side, or the right side of the mailpiece.

For me, I hate having labels at the bottom of the mailpiece because it means I have to pick each piece up out of the tray or out of my arm bundle to read the label. Whether the label is upside down or not, I want it at the top of the mailpiece, and I don't care where the spine is. Others in my office don't care where the label is on the mailpiece as long as it is right side up. They also don't care where the spine is. Most of the park&loop/walking routes would prefer the spine on the right side, as many feel that is better for fingering the mail.

I understand the powers-that-be are working with mailers to standardize the position of the address label on mailings. It will be interesting to see what comes of this.

And this little discussion brings me to one of the latest buzzwords in the USPS: standardization. Standardization is sweeping the Postal Service. Standardization makes it easy for upper management to enforce (here are the rules; now conform) and to observe for violations (this carrier has three pieces of equipment; only two are allowed; now conform), but absolute standardization, I think, is the bane of the Postal Service, and no

one seems to be addressing the fatal flaws in it. No two carriers are the same, no two routes are the same, and every day brings something different to the mix.

Management and the outsiders spent considerable time observing and taking notes on how carriers load their vehicles. Much to their surprise, I believe, they learned that we do not all load our vehicles in the same way. Some carriers load DPS trays on the floor, some place it on the tray to the left of the driver. Some carriers work advos from a tray while others use tubs. Those who use tubs place the tub of advos on the floor to the left of the driver's legs, and if those carriers usually place the DPS on the floor in that spot, then the DPS moves to the tray to the left of the driver. It is not unusual for carriers in our office to have 6-10 trays of DPS, and when mail is really heavy, we have had much more. They wanted us to stack our overflow DPS in the left side wheelwell, which is okay for up to 4 trays. I have never been able to get more than four in there. I often use the wheelwell for overflow DPS, but this is one of those day-to-day judgment calls, made in a micro-second, based on mail volume, type of route, numbers of bundles, etc.

Standardization seems to ignore the fact that intrinsic differences exist. Some routes are residential mounted, some are all business, some have apartments, some are all residential park&loop, some are single hop&drop delivery, and many are a mixture of these. Some carriers can read upside-down labels; others struggle with anything that is not rightside-up. Some days we have 3 trays of cased mail, 4 trays of DPS, and no third bundle, while on other days we may have 10 trays of cased mail, 12 trays of DPS, Advos and Advo cards, and a half-truckload of parcels.

Some things in the USPS can and should be standardized: postage; the blue drop boxes we want to be able to identify all over the country; letter carrier uniforms; the easily identifiable vehicles we take to the street; the services we offer; the forms we use, to name a few. Other things should be based on the needs of the route, the carrier, or the day. To standardize things that should not be standardized is, I believe, a gross business error.

3. Are you allowed to handle them at all in the office?

At first we were allowed to case the FSS flats. After about two weeks they began to ease routes a few at a time into taking them to the street. Eventually we were all required to take them to the street. We would clock in, roll the APCs holding our trays of FSS to our vehicles, load the FSS, check our vehicles, and then roll the APCs back into the post office. For a while they loaded our DPS letters on the APCs as well, and we loaded them directly into the LLVs before doing our vehicle checks just as we were doing with the FSS. This was not a big deal unless we found out later that we would have to hand off part of our route to someone else, or if a carrier were needed to double case and would be handing off the entire route...then we had to unload all or part of what we had already loaded---not efficient and not productive.

I am a T-6. I have one all-business route, one route that is almost all business with a little bit of residential mounted delivery (about 40 deliveries) and some condominiums

(about 56 units), another route that is half business and half mounted residential, one all mounted residential route, and one route that is almost all mounted residential with an NDCBU for about 5 business deliveries. I am on the work assignment list, so only a few times when I had substantial undertime did I have to carry any of the park&loop relays with FSS flats. That was a nightmare. I tried to work off the three bundles but ended up collating the flats in my LLV because working three address-labeled bundles (FSS, cased mail, and DPS) and trying to remember spurs and parcels in my bag were ridiculous, time-consuming and frustrating.

4. Do you collate them with the residual mail or take them directly to the street?

See answer above. To elaborate on "I ended up collating the flats in my LLV because working three address-labeled bundles (FSS, cased mail, and DPS) and trying to remember spurs and parcels in my bag were ridiculous, time-consuming and frustrating" : the FSS leaders eventually had a stand-up meeting asking us to please not collate the FSS in with our cased mail on the street because they were trying to measure delivery time based on taking that actual FSS bundle to the street, and collating would not reflect actual time needed to deliver the mail. Obviously, I was not the only one who found it more efficient to collate the mail. Fortunately, after this service talk I did not have to deal with park&loops again. I do think that the carriers whose routes are nearly all park&loop struggled enormously with the extra bundle, and many of them are very good and conscientious carriers. I believe we are all glad the test has come to an end.

The last official day of the test was June 10. After that, FSS continued to come in to the office as it had been during the test, because the engineers wanted to run some tests at the plant with the machine for about a week more. We were no longer required to take this FSS to the street. I think every carrier who had FSS chose to case those flats in the office. I think that should tell the powers-that-be everything they need to know about FSS: ideally it is a **means and not an end**. All of the carriers, both city and rural, involved in this test, no matter what kind of route we had, no matter how different we may be, all agreed on one thing: that extra bundle is a waste of time and effort. It is far better to case it in than deal with it as a separate bundle on the street.

As an informational aside: we have two zip codes at Carmel, 46032 and 46033. We have, I believe, 34 city routes and one auxiliary route and about 25-27 rural routes. Only the 46032 routes were involved in this test, so some were city routes and some were rural routes. I heard that 16 rural routes were involved at the start but not far into the test at least 9 of them dropped out. They did not want to take FSS to the street. Evidently, the extra time needed for delivery was cutting into their personal time, and they chose not to participate. Or so I heard. I would think that would speak volumes as well to the people pushing this. City carriers had no choice in the matter. I don't have a problem with that. It takes what it takes, and we get paid for what it takes. But once we did have a choice, we all chose to case it in and get the job done sooner.

5. How do you handle a 3rd (now a 4th) bundle?

I have touched on this in some of my other answers, but let me add a few thoughts. Handling extra bundles is never easy. The first day I had to take FSS to the street I was working off 7 bundles: FSS, cased mail, DPS, advo cards, advos, parcels, and hotcase mail. I was on my all mounted residential route. It was horrible. Nothing smooth about it, nothing natural, and when patrons came out to receive their mail, I had to check each bundle to see if they had anything. I must have looked so disorganized. At the end of the day I was so sore from all the twisting and turning and reaching I had to take Tylenol when I got home. I am not a whiner or complainer, and that statement makes me sound like such a baby, but it is true. I ached.

6. How much of an impact is it on your office time?

Without seeing the official timesheets and data, I would guess the office time difference is noticeable. After all, if a carrier cases at the rate of 4 feet per hour, and he/she gets 5 feet of FSS, we could project that, based on flats alone, the carrier would leave the office about 1 1/4 hour earlier than if he/she had to case those flats. The carriers on routes that were taking FSS to the street did leave the office earlier than usual, I would say.

7. How much has it impacted your road time?

Again, without seeing all the timesheets, I believe the street time was extended because we were working off an extra bundle. For me personally, I felt like it took forever on the street. In addition to working off an extra bundle, now we had to deal with missort, missent, hold and forward flat-sized mail on the street. They developed a sectioned short tray (one of the yellow trays from the early part of the test) to file these rejected pieces, but that was just one more piece of equipment and one more task to do on the street, and most of the carriers didn't use them for long.

To answer your question, though, in a nutshell, I would say FSS increased street time to a degree that the increase was more than the time gained in the office that morning.

8. Are all carrier routed flats including erclot, ercwh and ercws part of it or do you still get them distributed in the same manner as before with 3rd or 4th bundle expectations?

I confess I am not familiar with the terms "erclot, ercwh and ercws." So I will just say this, and maybe it will answer some of your questions. Catalogs, in route order from the publishers, were sent through FSS. Magazines in route order were sent through FSS. House to house flat-sized, addressed publications were sent through FSS, although I

am trying to remember whether there were any "resident" with an address sent through FSS or whether only name and address were sent through FSS.

Initially first class flats were not sent through FSS because management did not want to endanger the First Class service scores. They told us this at a stand-up. Eventually first class flats were processed through FSS for a while, but then it was discontinued. I never heard an explanation as to why they stopped. I can only assume it was because the EXFC scores dropped.

I would say, on an average day, carriers in the test program took three main bundles to the street: DPS, FSS, and cased mail. Subsidiary bundles might include parcels/spurs and hotcase mail. Hotcase mail consists of letters and/or flats that were misthrown to the carriers, picked up by clerks that morning, and sorted in a case by route for the carriers to take. I prefer pulling the hotcase mail just before I pull down, so that I can work these letters and flats in with the cased mail, but sometimes management frowns on this --- why is that? --- and sometimes, even though I pull this mail and case it in before I pull down, by the time I get to the hotcase on my way out to load my vehicle, I may have another handful of mail there to work on the street.

9. How about Advo or "marriage mail"?

(In this answer I have used "Advo" to indicate *any* marriage mail, or mail where we have one unaddressed flat piece and one addressed card, with the instruction that we deliver one unaddressed flat piece with each deliverable addressed card.)

On mounted city routes (I don't have any firsthand knowledge of how the rurals handled this) we took Advos and Advo cards to the street as separate bundles. That is how we are used to handling marriage mail on mounted city routes in this office. So on those days we had at least five bundles: FSS, DPS, cased mail, Advo mail, and Advo cards.

On walking routes the carriers were instructed to case the Advo cards and then collate the Advos with each stop as they pulled down. I only had to do this once, on my business route with the condominiums, and it was excruciatingly time consuming. 56 condos in the complex, maybe 54 after the two vacants are considered, so I had to case 54 Advo cards and collate 54 Advos as I pulled down the three relays. That day I had fewer than 15 pieces of FSS for the entire complex. It just seemed to me it would have been a far better use of time to have me case the few FSS flats and take the Advos to the street, but I didn't get to make that call. Too bad.

I was told by one of the data collectors that USPS is working with the Advo company to redesign their product to make it FSS machine friendly. I find it interesting that Advos were just fine all these years as long as the lowly carriers had to deal with slop falling out of them week after week, through rain, sleet and snow, but suddenly

Advos need to be redesigned so that they are nice and neat and machine-friendly. Do we count for nothing? I would have liked a carrier-friendly Advo from the get-go.

So what is on the horizon? I honestly do not know. I would hope that the Postal powers fully realize how much the United States Postal Service contributes to the fabric of our nation. I would hope that they recognize and value two of the strongest assets of the organization: one, an extensive system of postal facilities throughout the country, from sea to sea and border to border, accessible to all and staffed with friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful postal employees; and two, a multitude of friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful delivery personnel, be they city carriers or rural carriers, who hit the streets and roads of the nation six days a week, delivering to every home and business in the country, strengthening the fibers of communication that unite us all. No other business does what the United States Postal Service does.

I hope we never lose sight of that.