

## **Fate of rural post offices under review**

**By J.R. Logan**

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Arroyo Hondo resident Margarita Denevan is used to a big group dallying in front of the post office just down the road from her house. The parking lot is usually crowded, and there are neighbors catching up on local gossip or friends sharing family news.

"We're neighbors here, but we're not next door to each other," Denevan says. "The only place you can count on meeting your friends is at the post office."

Operations at many Taos County post offices could change. A meeting in Arroyo Hondo Wednesday (Nov. 28) was called by the U.S. Postal Service as part of a plan to reduce hours at locations with relatively light traffic.

The Arroyo Hondo Post Office is among 10 locations in Taos County under review. Changes could range from reduced hours to contracting postal services to a private business.

County post office locations that are up for review include those in Amalia, Arroyo Hondo, Carson, Cerro, Chamisal, Costilla, Ojo Caliente, San Cristóbal, Tres Piedras and Vadito.

Staff at several of those locations contacted by *The Taos News* said they were not permitted to talk with the press about the proposed changes.

Peter Hass, a spokesman for the Postal Service, told *The Taos News* about 13,000 locations are under review, and the process could take about two years.

Last year, 3,700 rural post offices across the country were living under the threat of closure. Those locations were granted a temporary reprieve in May after significant outcry.

The Postal Service recently announced a record \$15.9 billion loss for fiscal 2012. The bulk of those losses were attributed to the agency's inability to make mandated payments for future retiree health care. The post office does not rely on tax revenue.

Back in Arroyo Hondo, Denevan is worked up about what she sees as the inevitable closure of her nearby post office. (Her op-ed submission is on Page A13.) Last month, the Postal Service sent a letter and survey to those who use the Arroyo Hondo post office. The letter said that the Postal Service intends to cut the location's service hours from eight to six hours a day, but asked residents if they would prefer that the office close and be passed to an independent contractor.

Denevan said many of her neighbors aren't concerned. The Postal Service proposal would only cut a couple of hours a day from window service, and residents would continue to have access to delivery boxes.

But Denevan is wary. She sees the cut in hours as only the first step in the privatization of the Postal Service as a whole. She's worried about the inconvenience of having mail delivered elsewhere, and she doesn't like the idea of not seeing her neighbors chatting outside the office.

"I hate to think of the mess it's going to be," she said.

Denevan said she planned to bring up her concerns at the meeting Wednesday, which took place after press time.

Meetings in Amalia and Costilla were held in October. Meetings are scheduled this week in Arroyo Hondo, Ojo Caliente and Tres Piedras.

Meeting dates for other Taos County locations have not yet been announced.