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Canyon Post Office on Slow Road to Closure

By Chris Lavin



Nola Clifford, 7, shouts her support for the Canyon Post Office with a print made by local artist Jeanne Lorenz. Photos Chris Lavin

weeks ago, officials said that declining revenues, coupled with higher worker costs, made small post offices infeasible.

"We don't intend to downsize your service," said Gus Ruiz, the spokesperson for the Bay-Valley area of the postal system, which covers Moraga and Canyon. "We are simply reorganizing it," he told the full quarter of Canyon's 270-member community who showed up for the meeting.

Longtime postmaster (and resident) Tyrell has been given notice that she will lose her job as of Dec. 1. She has already been relocated to the Sunol office in preparation for downsizing, which could happen as early as this month.

"I'm so sad," Tyrell said at the community meeting, when she had to abruptly leave before she sobbed. She was born and raised in Canyon. Every single person who lives in town knows her, and that is not an exaggeration. Even 2-year-old Daphne Heylin, or 7-year-old Nola Clifford, could not be consoled. "I don't want the post office to close!" Nola said.

The closure of the Canyon post office is felt not only locally. When told of the imminent downsizing and move toward closure, Anne Hawkins of Burton Valley in Lafayette objected strongly.

"That is the biggest mistake," she said. "I love that post office." She goes there during the holidays to send Christmas presents. "It has become too easy to discount the value in a small community with a bit of independence. It's too convenient to conglomerate with no thought of social repercussions. Communities like that are small, but they are meaningful."

Postmaster Tyrrell is pivotal in the somewhat brief history of the post office. Even her mother, Virginia Menge, was the postmaster once. At the office's 90th birthday celebration (yes, held at the post office) in 2012, Tyrrell gave a brief oral history of the Canyon office, then confirmed something

It just might be the beginning of an end to an era: Canyon Post Office, the small community post office just outside Moraga that has been open for business since the old-growth redwoods started getting cleared at the turn of the last century, is now in the cross-hairs of the U.S. Postal Service. It has been downsized, and is on its way to full closure.

Likely starting this month, the post office will lose its longtime postmaster Elena Tyrell. A part-time contract employee will put up the mail and open the window for abbreviated hours.

"The loss of a career employee behind the counter of our post office will be detrimental to the coherence of our community," said Jonathan Goodwin, a 22-year Canyon resident who serves as the community liaison with fire and police agencies. "Because we lack home delivery and have to go personally to the post office to get our mail, if the person behind the counter has a long-term position here and comes to understand the life of the community, they can add a lot to it. But if that person is just here temporarily, clocking in and clocking out, we lose that connective link."

For the past decade, the USPS has been shutting down hundreds of post offices across the country. At a meeting with Canyon residents two weeks ago, officials said that declining revenues, coupled with higher worker costs, made small post

she said with her mother. Looking down at the redwood bench that had been freshly restored, where Menge was sitting, she asked, "Right, Mom?" Mom nodded.

Coincidentally, Menge herself just turned 90, and her birthday party was held in the grove at Canyon School, the only other public institution in Canyon. Just about everybody came. Many parked at the post office, and walked over.

To paint Canyon as an isolated community, however, is not accurate. Dozens of commuters drive from Moraga, Lafayette and Orinda to San Francisco, Oakland and other East Bay cities through the artery of Pinehurst Road, ending up on Highway 13 and beyond. Yet Canyon itself has no mail delivery, no cell phone service, and no cable. Goodwin, the fire liaison, managed to get a call box put in that goes directly to the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, mainly because of the sharp curve in front of the office on Pinehurst that should be labeled "accident waiting to happen," particularly at night.

"We have our issues," he said. "But the closure of the post office should not be one of them."



Postmaster Elena Tyrrell prepares to post the mail dropped in the box in the morning.

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