

[By Jenna Pizzi](#)

Vermont's congressional delegation expressed disappointment at the U.S. Postal Service's recommendation to essentially shut down a mail-processing facility in White River Junction.

If the recommendation is adopted, 245 postal employees could lose their jobs or be reassigned and facilities in Essex Junction and Manchester, N.H., would take over the mail-processing work now done in White River Junction.

"Here we are in Congress worrying about how we can create jobs," said Sen. Bernard Sanders in a phone interview on Friday. "And if the postal service does what it wants to do, it will cost us over 100,000 jobs across the country in the midst of a terrible recession."

Tom Rizzo, a spokesman for the U.S. Postal Service in Northern New England, said that if the proposal is adopted the Postal Service will work with the employees to place them in vacant positions at other facilities, in accordance with their respective collective bargaining agreements.

"There are three plants in the area that are working under capacity," Rizzo said. "There is not enough mail today to support keeping these large facilities open."

But Rep. Peter Welch argues that keeping the mail processing facilities open is important to providing good service to postal customers, especially those in rural areas like Vermont.

"The facility and its employees are essential to Vermont," Welch said in a statement Friday. "It provides good jobs and timely mail service for Vermonters."

Sen. Patrick Leahy echoed Welch's remarks, saying that the closure of the facility would only

make the postal system slower.

"I am concerned that this consolidation will mean a change for Vermonters from overnight service for the cost of a stamp to significantly longer mail delivery times," Leahy said in a statement.

In a document summarizing the results of the feasibility study performed for the White River Junction mail processing facility, it states that mail delivery times to residents and businesses would not change as a result of the facility eliminating its mail processing functions. Retail services and business mail acceptance will remain at the White River Junction facility, even if the processing facility closes, according to the study.

The document also states that local collection box pickup times may change as a result of the consolidation but there would still be a two- to three-day service standard for first class mail.

"Delivery service standards would change," said Rizzo. "Overnight would change to two or three days."

This decreased service time is exactly what Sanders is afraid will cause a "death spiral" for the postal service.

"You are going to make (the Postal Service) into a less significant operation and fewer and fewer people are going to use it," Sanders said.

In order to look at the cause of the problem, the Postal Service's budget, Sanders has sponsored a bill, cosponsored by Leahy, called the Postal Service Protection Act, which is expected to come to the Senate floor early next year.

The bill would eliminate the requirement of the postal service to pre-fund 75 years worth of future retiree benefits, which could save the Postal Service between \$5.4 billion and \$5.8 billion

per year.

"This is an unfair burden on the post office," said Sanders.

Sanders said he has been in contact with Postal Service officials asking them to delay making decisions to close facilities until his bill comes to the floor.

"If we can get the accounting right," said Sanders. "I believe we can save those jobs."

But Sanders said it may be too late to stop any action on the White River Junction facility.

The bill also aims to prevent the closure of rural post offices, such as the 14 facilities that the postal service is considering for closure in Vermont.

Leahy said he will try his hardest to push the bill forward, despite a standstill in Congress.

"As with many issues facing this year's slow-moving Congress, the difficult budget situation ... makes action on this bill difficult," said Leahy in a statement. "But we will do all we can."

A public meeting regarding the proposal to consolidate the White River Junction facility will take place on Dec. 15 from 6 to 7 p.m. at the Fireside Inn and Suites, 25 Airport Road in West Lebanon, N.H. Members of the public are also welcome to send a written comment by mail addressed to the Customer and Industry Contact Manager, Northern New England District, 151 Forest Ave. Suite 7022, Portland ME 04101.