

[By Bernie Becker](#)

Lawmakers hoping to force a House vote on a Senate-passed postal reform bill believe some of their colleagues could be swayed by their message of saving jobs and rural access to postal services.

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), who is circulating a letter of support for the Senate bill with Rep. Michael Grimm (R-N.Y.), also told The Hill that the measure has momentum behind it after clearing the Senate in late April.

Welch said those pressing for a House vote on the Senate measure would start their lobbying efforts in full this week, when members return to Washington from a district work period.

But the Vermont Democrat also acknowledged that those efforts face something of a time crunch, given that a Postal Service moratorium on closing facilities expires on May 15.

Supporters of the Senate bill have both urged the Postal Service to extend its moratorium, and the House to move quickly to pass postal legislation.

"It's very dangerous to lose all these jobs in this economy," Welch said Friday, the same day that the Labor Department reported that the economy added a disappointing 115,000 jobs in April. "And yes, we need efficiency in the Postal Service, but we also have to have rural service and the mail delivered."

The Senate bill, which was sponsored by a bipartisan quartet from the Senate Homeland Security Committee, would at best allow USPS to move to five-day delivery, one of the service's key cost-cutting initiatives, after two years.

Senators also amended the bill to bar the Postal Service from closing rural post offices for a year. Lawmakers like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) have said that USPS, which wants to cut \$20 billion from its annual balance sheet by 2015, would lose competitive advantages by cutting too many services and should instead focus on growing their business.

But top House Republicans – like Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), the chairman of the Oversight Committee and the sponsor of a GOP postal overhaul plan – have called the Senate plan insufficient, and Issa even suggested that the effects of the Senate bill become worse over time.

"Instead of finding savings to help the Postal Service survive, the Senate postal bill has devolved into a special interest spending binge that would actually make things worse," Issa said in an April statement.

For his part, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe, who has noted that first-class mail volume has declined amid increased electronic communication, has said that the Senate bill does not allow his agency enough flexibility to cut costs.

Donahoe has also said that the service would proceed methodically with any closures of postal processing centers, and that a significant number of rural post offices could be kept open with slimmer hours. As part of its consolidation efforts, USPS has said it is looking at more than 200 processing centers and thousands of local post offices.

At the same time, more than a couple House Republicans have indicated they want to add more protections for rural post offices to their chamber's bill.

A group of more than 15 lawmakers, led by Rep. Adrian Smith (R-Neb.), wrote to House leaders in April asking for changes to the GOP bill to ensure that "small and rural post offices will not continue to be the Postal Service's primary target."

Issa and Rep. Dennis Ross (R-Fla.), another key sponsor of the House postal plan, have said they are working with members from rural areas to preserve postal access.

The House bill would allow USPS to move more quickly to eliminate Saturday delivery, and give an oversight board authority to create a plan for consolidating post offices.

With all that in mind, Welch said that House supporters of the Senate bill would particularly focus on Republicans who hail from states where GOP senators voted for the postal measure.

Thirteen Republican senators in all, from 10 separate states, backed the Senate bill.

"The fact that those Republican senators voted that way indicates there is support in their states for a responsible reform bill," Welch said.

But Welch also acknowledged that his group faces some serious hurdles in getting the Senate bill a vote – especially the fact that House GOP leaders have not suggested they see much to like in the Senate bill.

"In the end, they get to make the call," the Vermont Democrat said. "Our job as rank-and-file is to build support so leaders can see what we think is the right path."