

By Matt Ryan, Burlington Free Press

The U.S. Postal Service has halted plans to sell its post office on Essex Way in Essex, for now.

The Postal Service tested the property's real estate value, but put the plans on hold sometime "in the last few weeks," spokesman Tom Rizzo said Monday. In the last few weeks, Vermont's congressional delegation wrote the postmaster general regarding the post office, and the Essex Selectboard received a petition with 250 signatures that supported keeping the facility open.

Rizzo would not say whether the delegation's April 8 letter influenced the Postal Service's decision to suspend its plans.

"We appreciate our customers' interest in the postal operations of the Essex Junction post office, and we take all comments into consideration," Rizzo said in a prepared statement. "Our plans have been temporarily suspended." We will report any and all changes to postal services (in Essex), should they be reconsidered in the future."

Rizzo would not say whether the Postal Service would notify town officials if its plans changed for the post office. Last fall, a postal employee notified Essex Town Manager Pat Scheidel that the Essex Way post office was on the chopping block.

Rizzo also would not say whether or when those plans could change, but added "there's nothing imminent" planned.

In their letter, Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders and Rep. Peter Welch told Postmaster General Jack Potter they contacted the Postal Service's Northern New England District Office in January, regarding the Essex post office, and had yet to receive a response.

"We are concerned about the policy for communicating with localities and with the congressional delegation about upcoming facility closures or changes in facility services," the delegation said. "We request that you determine a reasonable process for communicating these

decisions with our offices."

The Essex Selectboard asked the delegation for support regarding the post office via a letter in December.

"A second postal location does exist in town, but it was never designed for the impacts associated with a potential doubling of usage," the board said. "As such, closing the Essex Way facility would be a less than ideal outcome."

The Postal Service considers Essex as having one post office on Essex Way, and a station of that office on Pearl Street -- not two post offices. Last fall, Rizzo confirmed that the Postal Service considered selling the Essex Way property and consolidating its Essex retail and post office-box services to its Pearl Street location. The office's distribution center would be moved to Burlington, he said.

The Postal Service hoped to raise revenue by selling the Essex Way property, Rizzo said. The Essex 2009 Grand List assesses the building and corresponding 3.8 acres at nearly \$2.5 million.

"The potential sale of some of our real estate assets was a difficult decision to contemplate, but it would have been irresponsible for the Postal Service to take any available options off the table when facing the historic decline of our customers' use of the mail," Rizzo said in his prepared statement Monday. "Outside business auditors have projected further financial deficits on the order of \$238 billion over the next decade unless major steps are taken to address this downward trend."

Essex resident Paula Duke submitted the petition supporting the post office to the Selectboard at its April 5 meeting. Duke asked the petition accompany any communication the town had with either the Postal Service or Vermont's congressional delegation.