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Byron Donalds to U.S. postmaster: 'We need alternative solutions now'



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With a March municipal election approaching and islander frustration boiling, U.S. Congressman Byron Donalds is working to restore mail service to more than 15,000 coastal constituents hard hit by Hurricane Ian.

On top of the myriad woes Estero and San Carlos and Sanibel islanders are facing in the storm's aftermath, the lack of mail service has been a chronic irritant. Service has resumed on Captiva and the U.S. Postal Service has rigged up temporary quarters to serve also hard-hit Pine Islanders, but not for the other three islands and part of the nearby mainland.

Wednesday, Donalds sent U.S. Postmaster Louis DeJoy a formal request: Deploy mail boxes throughout the impacted areas and create a nearby pick-up site.

Though UPS, FedEx and other private services have been picking up and delivering to the islands for months, residents must drive to a south Fort Myers facility to retrieve their mail. Depending on traffic, the commute can be a good two hours. For those from Sanibel, it costs more than time and gas: They have to pay a newly reinstated toll to cross the causeway that links Sanibel and Captiva to the mainland.

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Sanibel business owner Cathy Lanier's letter to Postmaster Louis DeJoy last month speaks for many: "We are still having to take 1.5 hours from our day – no simple task when struggling to get our businesses back up and running after such devastating destruction – just to deliver and pick up our mail (and) paying tolls of \$9 per trip to cross the causeway to get to the only Postal Delivery location that has been provided for us after the storm. This is ridiculous ... Get us back mail delivery at least to a single point on island immediately. We cannot go on like this."

In his own letter to DeJoy, the Naples Republican wrote: "While I understand that time and patience are crucial to rebuilding Southwest Florida to a sense of normalcy, it's been 103 days since the storm made landfall. Bridges in the area have been reconstructed in record-breaking time, and the overall restoration of our community has rapidly progressed ... Residents of FL-19 are experiencing high gas prices and the added economic burden of reinstated tolls, and the inconvenient trip – just to deliver and receive mail (that) severely alters my constituents' daily schedules."

Donalds also pointed out that Sanibel's municipal elections are March 7 and "USPS has an important role in the overall administration of a secure election – especially given the increased popularity of mail-in ballots."

Lanier wishes Donalds had been more specific. "He should have provided alternative solutions that we've already rounded up. For instance, in Sanibel, one of the local banks has offered to let the U.S.P.S. put a trailer in their parking lot to facilitate mail delivery and pickup. I'm sure similar arrangements could be made in Fort Myers Beach," she wrote in an email.

As of Thursday morning, DeJoy hadn't responded to Donalds, reported Harrison Fields, "But to be fair, we only sent the letter yesterday," he added.

Thursday, U.S. Postal Service spokesman David Walton wrote in an email: "The U.S. Postal Service continues to work toward restoring service to our customers in areas hardest hit by Hurricane Ian. This includes the use of the trailers currently on site at the Fort Myers Beach location. Additional work is required to prepare the trailers for deployment, which is still ongoing. More information will be provided when the temporary units become operational."