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THE NINE-DIGIT ZIP CODE

The American people have accepted the bureaucracy's labelling them with the long and cumbersome number necessary to collect Social Security benefits and to pay taxes. With some grumbling and several years' effort, the American people have fully accepted the five-digit zip code.

But now the U.S. Postal Service proposes to stamp us all with a nine-digit zip code. Instead of having a zip code for an entire small city or large neighborhood in a big city, we would have separate zip codes for areas as small as individual city blocks.

No one knows how many additional zip codes it would take to zip us all from coast to coast. Estimates vary from 20,000 to 10 million new zips.

All evidence indicates that the American public is just plain unwilling to accept being zipped with nine digits. This intuition of the people has good reason behind it; experts say that the human mind simply finds it exceedingly difficult to retain a sequence of more than seven digits.

It has been estimated that the initial cost to the government for buying all the equipment to handle the nine-digit zip code would be more than $1 billion. The cost to U.S. businesses and non-profit organizations to convert their mailing lists to the nine-digit zip would be at least another billion dollars.

Of course, such costs would be passed on to consumers as a hidden tax. But the worst part is, on top of all that expense, the Postal Service doesn't have any firm idea of the plan's efficiency value and cannot guarantee that it will speed up delivery of the mails.

When it comes to estimating how much it will cost to sell the nine-digit zip code system to the American people, it's impossible to give even a ballpark figure. Without public support, the plan is doomed to fail.

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Senator Howell Helfin (D.-AL) is concerned that the proposed nine-digit zip code system has gone too far too fast. He has listened to the Postal Service's explanation of its plan but remains unconvinced of the urgency of putting it into effect on June 1 of this year.

Senator Heflin has introduced a bill to stop the Postal Service from implementing the nine-digit zips until Congress has fully investigated the costs, the purpose, and the anticipated benefits.

His bill doesn't kill the nine-digit notion; he merely asks Congress to look before it leaps into a costly unknown. In a Congress whose first priority is supposed to be cutting the budget, this seems only reasonable.

The 3¢ increase in the cost of first-class mail and the 2¢ increase in postcards would not be used to pay the costs of the nine-digit zip code. Those costs are in addition.

Meanwhile, the Postal Service has bought a $28 million "campus-like environment" in a posh Washington, D.C., suburb where it plans to conduct "management seminars" to train postal managers. The local residents are protesting loudly and by litigation.

The computer generation takes as a "given" that new equals better, that tomorrow equals progress, and that science and technology equal improved service and a better quality of life. But when it comes to the mails, it 'tain't so.

In the good old days of prior to 1950, we had the convenience and superior service of two home (as well as business) mail deliveries a day, and certain next-day delivery in a metropolitan area. A 30¢ "special delivery" stamp brought a personal messenger service to your door with more certainty than the $7.50 express mail procedure today.

A few years ago, the ivory-tower bureaucrats thought they would force the metric system down the throats of an unwilling public. When their plan surfaced in the real world, they found the public simply would not accept all those costly and unnecessary changes in their measurements of property, highway travel, and recipes.

The nine-digit zip code should be filed in the vaults with other mistakes of the federal bureaucracy such as the Susan B. Anthony dollar.

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