

## Rothman Fights For Funds To Protect New Jersey Postal Facilities From Bioterror

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New Jersey Postal Facilities From Bioterror  
Gets Assurances From Postmaster General Potter That Trenton Facility  
Will Have Biohazard Detection Equipment Before It Reopens

Washington, DC - While questioning United States Postal Service (USPS) Postmaster General and CEO John Potter during a congressional hearing today about safety at the Trenton mail sorting facility that was closed due to anthrax contamination, Congressman Steve Rothman (D-Fair Lawn) received assurances that the site would not open until biohazard detection equipment was in place. Rothman blasted the Bush Administration for proposing a Fiscal Year 2005 budget that does not provide money for the purchase of biohazard detection equipment at all mail sorting facilities and urged his colleagues on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation and Treasury, which held today's hearing, to fully fund the security equipment purchases. Potter himself acknowledged that additional funding is needed to acquire biohazard detection equipment at each of the USPS's 282 mail processing and distributing sites.

"While I am pleased that Postmaster General Potter has committed to placing biohazard detection equipment at the Trenton mail sorting facility, I am very much concerned about the impact that the Bush Administration's refusal to include funding in the budget for biohazard detection equipment will have on the safety of the mail handlers, postal clerks, customers and the general public who will be working and patronizing all other New Jersey mail sorting facilities," said Rothman. Stating that he "hoped that there would be some recognition on the part of the Postal Service that New Jersey has been a target and hotspot" during the war on terrorism, Rothman asked Potter whether the Postal Service had already procured biohazard detection equipment for the Trenton facility and if it would be installed prior to its reopening.

Though Potter acknowledged that only two sites, one in Baltimore and one in Cleveland, have currently deployed biohazard detection equipment, Tom Day, Vice President for Engineering for the Postal Service, who also testified at the hearing, responded that "the Postal Service has made a firm commitment that the Trenton facility, having been the subject of the original attack on the mail supply, will have [such equipment] in place before postal employees return to work." Day stated that the Postal Service is currently refurbishing the Trenton facility, which may be ready to open by early fall and no later than the end of the calendar year.

Responding that he was gratified that the Postal Service was committed to safeguarding the health of postal employees in Trenton, Rothman asked Potter how he could guarantee that such equipment will be installed if - as he noted in his prepared testimony - the basis of the Postal Service's budget request to the Republican-controlled Congress and the Bush Administration is the continued pressing need to procure such equipment. Rothman stated, "What will you do, if the request [for biohazard detection equipment] is not met?" Potter responded that "the Administration has a decision to make about priorities when it comes to spending. They obviously have made a decision, a recommendation to Congress, regarding those priorities. We believe that other considerations should be given."

President Bush's budget request for Fiscal Year 2005 does not include funds for biohazard detection equipment and mail safety. However, the USPS, which is a quasi-independent operation, has asked the Congress to include \$779 million in the budget for bioterror preparedness and prevention.

"Frankly, in light of the recent discovery of the deadly poison ricin in the United States Senate and the mailing of a ricin-laced letter to the White House last year, I find the Bush Administration's decision to be irresponsible and unacceptable," Rothman said. "Clearly, the threat of toxic contamination of the mail system and the devastating effect it could have on our economy remains very high."

The next step is for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation and Treasury, in the coming months, to

put together a Fiscal Year 2005 funding bill for the USPS and other federal agencies under its jurisdiction. The Subcommittee must also determine whether to fulfill Rothman's and Potter's call for Congress to fund biohazard equipment for the USPS. Rothman pledged to work to persuade his colleagues on the panel to encourage them to provide the necessary funding.

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