



Postman Cliff McNeal, right, shares a laugh with friend Bud Telford in the tiny Redondo post office.

Ron Wutzer / Seattle Times

## Postman wants to open general store too

### McNEAL

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comfortable, simple atmosphere that seems more like the 1930s than the '90s.

"We don't have any customers here, only friends," said McNeal, 51, during a recent afternoon at his office in the southeast corner of Sally's restaurant parking lot. The 106-square-foot room is crammed with 266 post-office boxes, a small counter, drawers full of stamps and a few letter scales.

McNeal has been this community's postman for 4½ years, operating the office under a contract from the U.S. Postal Service. But he's been a friend longer than that, having lived in the area for 30 years.

If he gets his way, the town will have him for a lot longer as not only friend and postman, but also as owner of a general store.

McNeal and his wife, who runs the office on Saturdays, are in the process of buying the town's old firehouse, which is about a block northeast of his current office at 281st Street and Ninth Avenue South.

The late 1940s building is in

an area zoned for multifamily use. Its bottom floor is empty, but the top is used as a studio apartment.

McNeal has asked the county to grant him a zone reclassification so he can build a combination general store and post office on the bottom floor, which people would enter through the firehouse's huge bay doors. He hopes to open the Redondo Community Store this summer.

"Whatever Cliff wants, give him," said Joe Huseby, who has kept a box at the Redondo Post Office the past 33 years and calls McNeal the best of the 12 or so postmen the waterfront town has had during that time.

That type of unquestioning confidence was typical of the support McNeal received at Sacajawea Junior High School on Monday for a hearing to discuss whether to allow the zoning reclassification.

County officials were surprised by the support and turnout of about 100 people, said Stacie Dages, community planner. When the issue of landscaping arose, several people offered to do the work for McNeal.

"That type of support is definitely out of the ordinary," Dages said. "My bosses were surprised, even though I kept

telling them a lot of people would come since he's so popular." The planning committee will recommend approval within the next week, she said, and the council could vote on it in the next month or so.

The lone opposition at the meeting came from Franklin Pierce, who lives across the street from the firehouse and was concerned that dust might be kicked up from traffic.

A couple mornings after the meeting, Pierce showed up at McNeal's door. He was willing to compromise.

As long as McNeal would agree to put in 10-foot-wide strip of trees and shrubs between the firehouse and Pierce's house across the street, Pierce would back the plan.

They had a deal, and McNeal had another friend.

"He's one of the nicest guys you could meet," Pierce said later.

Most of the people who rent the 266 post-office boxes in this tight-knit community are retirees for whom picking up the mail is an important daily event. Many could have rural delivery service to their houses, but choose to make the trip into town.

The U.S. Postal Service decides the rental rate on the boxes,

which were built in 1959 and are the old combination type. Boxes in other cities rent for more than \$40 a month, but the rate at Redondo is the same it's been for about the past 20 years: \$2.

Among the 25 people or so who stopped by to check their boxes or drop off mail on a recent afternoon, McNeal knew the names of all but one, and he picked her name off her mail and called her by it as she left.

When Cathy Johnstone stopped to pick up her mail, her 18-month-old son, Steven, was escorted by McNeal to the doorway, where his height was marked to chronicle his growth on a wall with a lot of pencil marks.

Children in general get special treatment at McNeal's post office. Whenever they bring mail in, McNeal lets them apply the circular red-ink stamp that shows a letter has been received by the postal service.

Ben Meservey, Auburn postmaster responsible for Auburn, Federal Way, Pacific and Algonia, says McNeal's office is one of six in his area run by contractors.

"We went through a lot of people before we found Cliff," Meservey said. "He does a heck of a job and everyone seems to love him."