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A Neighborhood of Broken Windows

“Recall how uninviting are neighborhoods of houses with broken windows. They repel, not invite, passers-by. The ham radio ‘neighborhood’ is experiencing its share of broken windows, and our own community is breaking the glass.”

In my first column in June 2016, I said that ARRL’s most daunting task is balancing and managing the diversity of interests in our community. Recent actions by ARRL have produced a series of miniature storm cells — nothing Earth-shaking; loud but localized — emanating from vociferous special interest groups. There’s price changes in the QSL bureau; an overhaul of ARRL’s *Repeater Directory*; and still, there’s the dues increase of 2015. Each of these decisions was undertaken after thoughtful and rigorous analysis.

Let’s be done with dues. Before the 2015 increase, ARRL last raised dues in 2001. The new schedule represented a 25% increase from \$39 to \$49. In real (inflation-adjusted) terms, the \$49.00 price of membership today ought to be \$53.11 merely to stay even with inflation of 2.08% per year. ARRL’s cost consists mostly of people, and we must pay these talented people a couple percent more each year, or we lose them. Anyone seriously believing that a dues increase was unwarranted after 15 years might review fractions, percentages, and compound interest.

Recently, we raised the price of processing cards through the outgoing bureau, instituting a handling charge. Bureau prices have not increased in 5 years. Today’s increases reflect higher costs, fixed and variable. Cost is especially impactful on small submissions. According to our accounting procedures, each submission must — because each involves money — be opened by the controllers department. One card, or a thousand. The bureau is not designed for one, two, three cards. For these, you may wish to buy a *Global Forever* stamp for a buck fifteen and send it regular-way post. Or accumulate a larger stack. Small shipments have been plagued by frequent underpayment: a submission priced (at the old price) at four or five dollars is often accompanied by only one or two dollars in the envelope. We sent the cards anyway. No one complained about *that* practice. Now we rebill. There has been some outright abuse with very large shipments. Volunteer card sorters are permitted to send their own QSL cards through the system at no charge (a practice called *franking* in Congress) as a courtesy for the work they do. A few sorters took advantage of this privilege and began adding 20 or 30 *pounds* of cards — *not their own*. Cost to us: several hundred dollars each. That practice had to stop.

Since prices in the bureau were last raised, international freight rates (we don’t use USPS) have climbed by 50%. So an increase from \$0.85 to \$1.15 per ounce only recovers two-thirds of the increase. Our colleagues at *CQ Magazine* recently offered a torturous, uninformed analysis of the price increase’s impact on small submissions. The *CQ* commentator admits he

is uninformed on our costs. That’s manifestly obvious. We are not the Post Office: no massive subsidies for us. We merely need to recover, in a timely manner, some of our ever-escalating costs. Paper QSL cards remain important to us.

And then there’s the *Repeater Directory*. For more than 3 decades, ARRL has published a directory limited exclusively to coordinated repeaters. Recent sales have slowed significantly. Why? Our readers report that they want all repeaters listed, coordinated or not. They want all available information, more timely and online, 21st-Century style. For this reason, we have partnered with RFinder to produce a 2018 directory, which includes all repeaters but boldly highlights those reported as coordinated sites. In combination with the RFinder smartphone app, listings are maintained continuously. What glass-breaking that set off! “You’ve betrayed coordinators, slapped them in the face,” I am told. “ARRL is not supporting coordination,” I hear. For 30 years, we’ve avoided publishing un-coordinated repeaters. *That would be 30 years of support*. How’s that worked out? Not so well, according to one west coast coordination dean who lectured me on the phone for an hour and 40 minutes, but finally admitted overall coordination is falling far behind the growth of repeaters. The math is indisputable: the current version of the RFinder app lists 36,000 US and Canada repeaters — of which only 19,000 (53%) are coordinated. I remind everyone that *coordination is the responsibility of coordination groups, not ARRL*. We support the coordination of repeaters. The new directory will provide coordination groups with a list of prospects to *coordinate*, so we can get that report card up from 53% to the mid-90s. If publishing only coordinated repeaters hasn’t worked for 30 years, let’s try something new. Let’s try reasoned persuasion, which doesn’t include a lecture, a finger-wag, or the warehousing of pairs for friends. Even if the data should prove inconvenient, we’ll continue to support the coordination mission. You have my word on that.

I’ve visited with many radio clubs around the country this year. Every Q&A session includes the question, “How can we get more people, especially younger people, to join our community?” After reciting the numerous initiatives to expand our demographics, I am forced to respond with my own question: “How attractive is a neighborhood of broken windows?” Let’s stop squawking, stop breaking windows.