

The Sunday Times
Perspective

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Amid long-lasting mail woes, return DeJoy to sender

I wish Gary Vaccarella could meet Paul Hurlburt, Christina Irving and Bill Puckett.

All three live in the Hotel Jermyn Apartments downtown, and aren't getting their mail on time, or in Paul's case, at all.

Vaccarella is the director of the postal service's Pennsylvania-Delaware district, and has demonstrated a disturbing detachment from the delivery problems impacting customers who depend on



CHRIS KELLY
Kelly's World

the mail for luxuries such as paychecks, medical supplies, time-sensitive bills, bank statements and government and insurance forms and mail-in ballots.

Paul, an Air Force veteran, needs copies of a court

order that shows he pays child support in New York and a discharge form that documents his military service to qualify for benefits. Both have been sent five times, but bounced back to the senders as "undeliverable."

"I asked the mailman and he said it's 'a problem with the machines,'" Paul said as we chatted on the curb in the Thursday afternoon sun. "What does that mean?"

I don't know. I thought

Gary Vaccarella might, so I requested an interview in an email to USPS spokesman Paul Smith. He responded swiftly:

Hi Chris. We respectfully decline request but if you wish to submit some questions I can work on obtaining some answers for you.

*Best,
Paul*

I appreciate Smith's timely response, but I don't work that way. I didn't even know Vaccarella existed until his

name was raised by U.S. Rep. Matt Cartwright. The Democrat running for reelection against a Republican placekicker from Hazleton

dropped by the Times Building for an interview with the editorial board on Thursday.

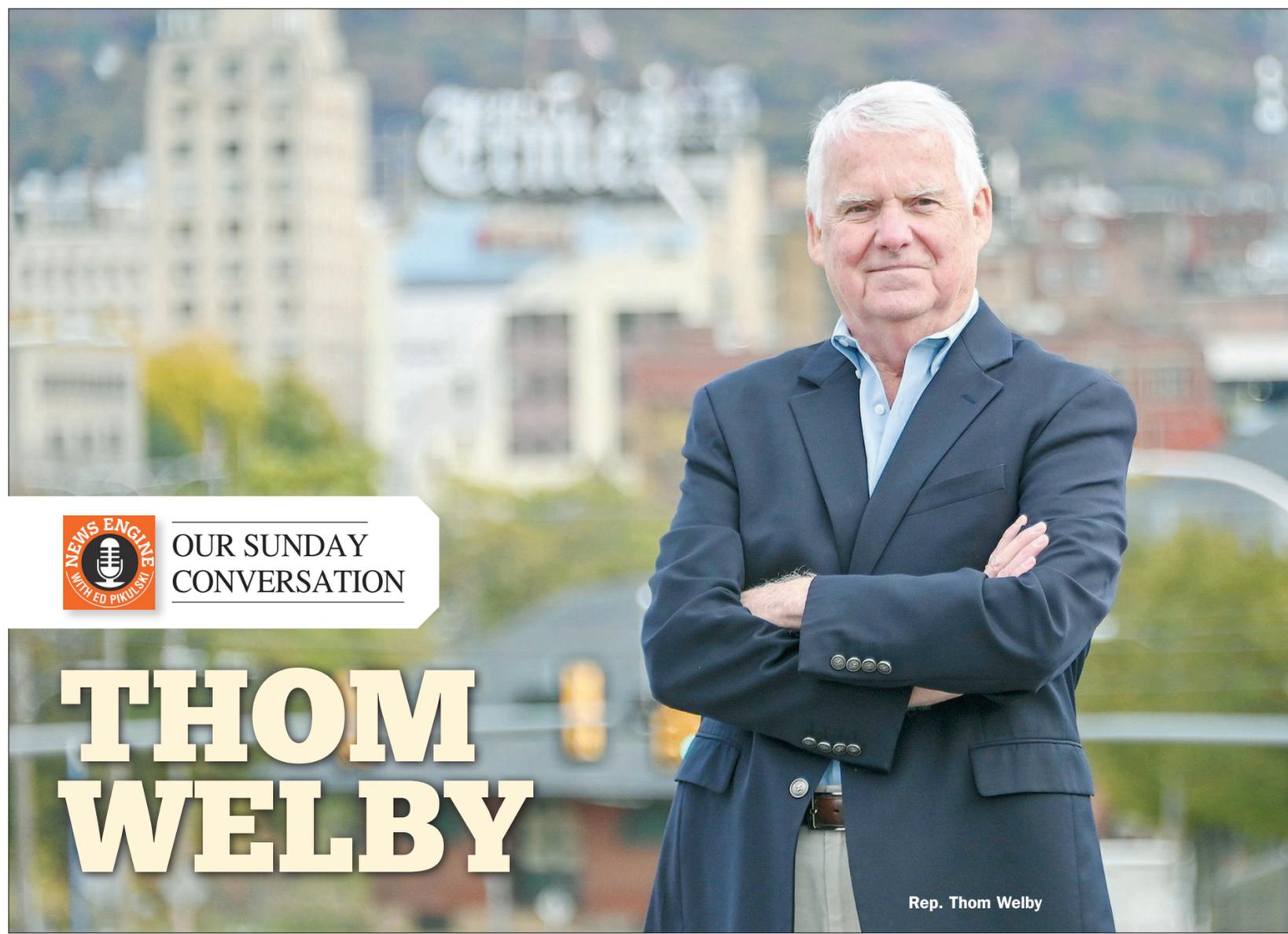
Cartwright, along with Sen. Bob Casey and U.S. Rep. Dwight Evans of Philadelphia, made headlines last week by penning a First-Class letter to Postmaster Gen. Louis DeJoy.

"While we recognize the

extraordinary circumstances the Postal Service has experienced in recent years and are grateful for the front-line postal workers who served our communities under difficult circumstances, we cannot ignore the reports of systemic problems with the quality of mail service," their letter says.

"Quality service — timely, secure and responsive service — is not optional."

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OUR SUNDAY CONVERSATION

THOM WELBY

Rep. Thom Welby

SUNDAY TIMES FILE

This question and answer has been edited for length and clarity.

NE: Tom Welby is a former broadcaster sales and advertising executive, chief of staff for state Rep. Marty Flynn, and current representative of the 113th Legislative District. Welcome to the News Engine podcast, Tom.

TW: Thank you. It's good to be here.

NE: I got the sense that you enjoy it. You had kind of a unique way to hit the ground running. You had spent nine years working for (then state representative) Marty Flynn in the job that you currently have. It had to give you a unique look into the needs of the district and really allow you to hit the ground running.

TW: Absolutely, it did. And we didn't change much from the way Marty ran the district, the way he represented the district first. We wanted to work on things that were important to our district. And No. 1 is — well, not No. 1, but one of the No. 1s — is funding for school districts and the way it's structured. It's not right that different school districts around the commonwealth are getting different amounts of funding, and it's not based on the needs of the district. And that's just not right. That was one of the things I wanted to work for. But one of the other things that Marty did that I continue is, if you call and you say "there's a pothole behind my house in the alley and we have neighbors who have lost their tires back there and it's cra-

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zy," instead of saying here's the number for City Hall — because it's certainly not a state representative's issue — they would say that they are not getting any results complaining about it. We go out, take pictures of it and send them over to our contact at DPW or City Hall or wherever ... and say please help these people, please do something about it. The state representative or the state senator does have some juice and have some influence. A lot of times we're able to help people where you and I as Joe Blow can't get it done. Marty liked doing that and I liked doing that as well.

NE: Yeah, you'd always heard that about Marty. And since then you. You had touched upon the unfair funding for school districts. Where do we stand with that? You leave before that mission is accomplished, right?

TW: We have a Band-Aid that we were able to accomplish, a huge bandage for Scranton with Gov. Wolf pushing through almost by executive action, although they did bring it before the Legislature. And that's increased funding for this year. And it also increased funding for a lot of the elements within school districts' budget, that besides the general fund things

like special needs, education, things for mental health issues that exist within the school district.

Those kinds of things increased funding for that. So we wound up getting an increase of about \$20 million over what was given to the district last year. So that was terrific. But again, it was a one-time deal. Now, with the excess funds that exist in surplus in the commonwealth that wasn't spent this year — and quite a bit was — hopefully next year, we'll get another Band-Aid until we can finally get to that point where we have a majority in the House and the Senate that will agree to this.

And part of the problem is across the commonwealth you have about 500 school districts. And with that you have about a third are underfunded, a third with a little bit more than perhaps they need or should be getting, and a third are right in the middle. If they do the fair funding, the one-third will remain the same, the one-third will get their increased fair funding, but a third is going to get less funding, which will mean their budget has remained the same. Where they get that money from can change but their budget remains the same. If the state cuts that funding to them, they have to

make it up from somewhere. And what they'd have to do is raise their local taxes to make up what they wouldn't get from the state. So you have a third of the schools around the state are getting less money, and what senator or what representative is going to come home and say, "By the way, I voted for us to get less state funding to our school district. Now we're going to have to raise your taxes. Isn't that great? But the rest of the state is going to be fair?"

NE: Yeah, we made it fair for everyone. But you get a tax.

TW: Yes, and for that reason, it's just not passing. We have to get people to the attitude of with all due respect to everybody, we have to do the right thing. And it's been difficult down in the House and the Senate to get people to go with that and abide by what we should be doing what is right. I think what's going to happen before that is the court will issue a ruling and has been under court review. The court case itself, there are five districts in the commonwealth, including Wilkes-Barre is one of them, that filed a suit based on unfair funding. And I hope that the court is going to rule in favor of the school districts. And that way it will be mandated by the courts, as opposed to by the Legislature.

NE: Give some of the elected officials a little bit of cover there. You don't have to go back and do what you just described.

TW: The state will then — because of a court order — have to provide that fair funding. So

that's the way we'll finally get to it. I think.

NE: I don't know if a lot of people know this about you. But you're one of 13 kids in your family. And your dad passed away when you were pretty young. So how did growing up in such a large household shape your approach to service and being an elected official?

TW: And yeah, you're right. It was 13 kids and my dad died in 1969 of leukemia. I just turned 19 and my older brother just joined the Navy and my sister had just gotten married.

So I was the oldest one at home at 19. And it was certainly a challenge for my mom. I think back about it, and I wasn't the most quiet kid or I didn't sit in a corner. I was pretty active, and so were my brothers and sisters. I think about that — a single mom having 11 kids at home. I think about having 11 of me. I don't know what I would have done, but she managed to keep us in line and keep us fed and keep us clothed.

And when my dad was still alive it was in the late '50s I guess or maybe the early '60s. One of my first recollections of public service was Danny Thomas started this drive, where he got families, a lot of kids involved in raising money for what would become St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. And we all went out with our little canisters, collecting money door to door or wherever it was, standing in front of the supermarket

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