

Reinventing the Mail Truck

Wheels

By AARON M. KESSLER

ARLINGTON, Va. — On a recent snowy morning, Michael Ellis prepared his mail truck for the daily route he has run here for the last decade, through a neighborhood in the Washington suburbs.

White, boxy mail trucks are a staple of neighborhoods across the country. But the aging vehicles — many date to the late 1980s — were built for a different era. They have no anti-lock brakes, airbags or even air-conditioning, and more important, the mail trucks simply are too cramped to carry the increasing number of packages postal carriers deliver.

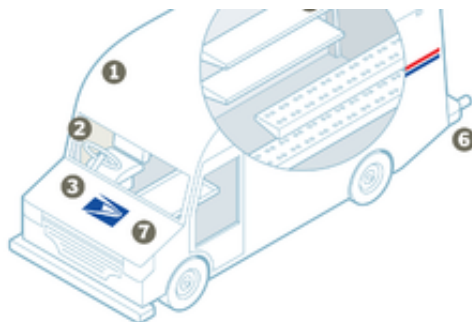
"It's been a good vehicle for me, but it just can't keep up anymore with what we need," Mr. Ellis said, pointing to the stacks of boxes in the back of his truck.

Mr. Ellis, a mail carrier for nearly 29 years, remembers when the post office here received its first batch of the Grumman-bodied trucks around 1990. Back then, he said, they were a dream compared with the Ford Pinto he had been using.

"Oh man, that Pinto, that was the worst," he said, chuckling. "These trucks were a big step up back then. But as with everything, times have changed."

Responding to those changes, the [United States Postal Service](#) has announced it will replace its fleet of Grumman mail trucks with what it calls its next-generation delivery vehicle. The goal is to harness new technologies, increase fuel efficiency and help the Postal Service better compete on package deliveries with the likes of FedEx and United Parcel Service.

Already, automakers are working to compete for the coveted contract, worth an estimated \$6 billion to produce 180,000 vehicles. And although manufacturers declined to divulge details of their designs, the outlines of the mail truck of the future are emerging based on the requirements that the Postal Service has detailed.



[Graphic | A New Postal Service Truck](#)

The biggest shift: Drivers must be able to stand up. With the rise in online retail sales, drivers are increasingly delivering packages, not just envelopes, and need more room in the back of the vehicle to store boxes and walk among them.

To this end, the Postal Service has asked automakers to consider a “fully enclosed van style body” that would have internal cargo capacity and even sliding side doors.

“Most likely it’ll be a van of some kind, but we’re still early in the process,” said Sarah Ninivaggi, a spokeswoman for the Postal Service. “It will definitely be larger and likely with a different shape than what we have now.”

Automakers were told to make plenty of room in the back of the vehicle for packages, including shelving units and sorting machines to help ease access to the boxes during delivery.

Those features would be welcome by Mr. Ellis and his fellow mail carriers, who in December alone delivered 524 million packages, an 18 percent increase over the previous year.

“It would be great to be able to maneuver back there, to not have to step over parcels and be able to organize them better,” he said. Recently, some makeshift shelves were installed to help, he said, but there simply is not enough room to work efficiently.

Two weeks ago, the Postal Service met with automakers interested in building the vehicles, and the process — by government contract standards — was set to accelerate quickly. Companies will submit information by the middle of this month to be deemed “qualified” to bid. Those chosen will then formally bid and have their designs ready for postal officials by the summer.

From there, officials will choose two or three versions, and automakers will produce working prototypes over the next six months, Ms. Ninivaggi said. The vehicles will be tested in real-world situations by postal workers and in other test situations, until the winner is decided. The new fleet is scheduled to begin operating in 2018.

Some of the changes are aimed at simply bringing the truck in line with current standards. Among the new features the post office wants are not only items like airbags, but also backup cameras and warning systems, ergonomic seats and doors, and antiskid surfaces.

Mr. Ellis, the Virginia postal carrier, showed how precarious the bare-metal footholds by the driver’s door can get in the wintry weather. “It’s easy to slip,” he said. “People started putting strips down to try and help, but even then.”

While the Postal Service is not claiming the new mail trucks will reduce the number of accidents, it does expect they will keep postal workers safer if they are in a crash. (It

declined to provide recent accident figures.)

Mr. Ellis said anti-lock brakes would be a welcome addition to help navigate wet and wintry weather. He also said the current trucks could get a little top-heavy toward the end of the day, when the truck was emptier, and a new design with improved weight distribution would help.

"They can slide around a little, so you learn to be careful in those conditions," he said.

Backing up is also a challenge. A large yellow sticker on the dashboard of Mr. Ellis's truck warns drivers to not back up unless necessary.

"I'll try to park where I never have to back up. But that's not always possible," he said. "A lot of us here asked about backup cameras, and thankfully that's been included in what the next truck will have."

Better fuel economy is paramount; the current trucks achieve only about 9 miles per gallon. In the 2014 fiscal year, the Postal Service spent \$539 million over all just on fuel. The competition is open to alternative motors, like hybrid, natural gas, fuel cell or electric, if automakers can demonstrate they can do the job as well as internal combustion engines.

The contract is a potential windfall for automakers, which in recent years have given their commercial fleet vehicles a significant overhaul.

"Getting the Postal Service contract all by itself could justify the expense of developing an entirely new model line," said Karl Brauer, an analyst with Kelley Blue Book, adding that it takes on average about \$1 billion to develop a new vehicle.

Mr. Brauer said the aggressive push into the commercial van market over the last several years by the likes of Ford, Fiat Chrysler and Nissan meant they potentially could also adapt one of their platforms into the postal truck.

Mercedes-Benz, whose Sprinter van was largely recognized as a significant leap forward when it debuted about a decade ago, now has competition, Mr. Brauer said, as automakers bet on corporate and government fleets being ready for a refresh after the recession.

"They saw this coming and recognized they needed to up their game if they wanted to compete," he said.

He also said the Postal Service "could be pressured to pick a domestic automaker, though that will be secondary to cost considerations."

Automakers would not say much about pursuing the postal contract. A spokesman for

Fiat Chrysler said the company was reviewing the details provided by the Postal Service, "but beyond that, we're not commenting further."

General Motors said it was "early in the process of exploring potential solutions that would work" for the postal vehicle. And Ford Motor said only that it was capable of "commercial-grade solutions that can be tailored to meet a wide variety of business or fleet needs."

As he stood near his truck in the cold morning air, Mr. Ellis said that although it had been a good partner for the last decade, one thing he would not miss was the vehicle's propensity for breakdowns. It's not uncommon for mail carriers to be stranded on their routes while waiting for repairs or a tow.

"It's hard to even get parts for it anymore," he said. "That's when you know you're driving something old."