

Longer ZIP Code Up Again

DON'T look now but your incoming catalogs, million-dollar prize announcements and other business mail may be carrying a new number before long. It will be a zip code nine digits long.

The idea of a zip code the same length as your Social Security number was first advanced in 1978, and the Postal Service began installing automated equipment to read it, so postal employees wouldn't need to do so in order to route mail to your carrier.

The plan didn't appeal to members of Congress. Some said it was unnecessary, ill-conceived and expensive, so a prohibition was adopted to postpone its use. That ban expires Saturday, Oct. 1.

Congressional criticism apparently has subsided. Rep. Glenn English, Cordell Democrat, has indicated he won't try again to block it but will "carefully monitor" it. A Michigan senator who favors the longer zip code says it is for business users and "we're saying don't even tell the public about it."

The statement that the proposed code is for businesses is correct, because incentives to use it are directed toward big mailers. They would get reduced rates for mail that carries a nine-digit zip code and more if the mail is presorted so that mail clerks won't have to run it through the new machinery.

The fact is that an unknown number of private firms and other mailers, including the Oklahoma City Utilities Services Billing, already are using the longer zip code voluntarily.

Business accounts for an estimated 80 percent of all mail handled by the Postal Service. Discounts for using the nine-digit zip code would range from less than a cent to 3.5 cents for presorted first class mailings, but only for 250 pieces or more.

That automatically shuts out private citizens, who might not be concerned about how many digits are on mail they receive, providing their names are spelled correctly. But would they be expected to use nine digits on mail they send to business firms?

The General Accounting Office was asked by Congress to study the proposal and presumably GAO will make its report to the Postal Service board of governors when that body meets in October. Then we will find out whether we will have to learn to use "ZIP plus four" in order to have business mail delivered to our door.

The Postal Service made one "improvement" recently when Postmaster General William Bolger decreed that second, third and fourth class mail may no longer be referred to by employees as "junk mail." It is now referred to as "bulk business mail."