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EDITORIALS

LEDGER OPINIONS

[PUBLIC RECORDS IN PERIL]

Keep Florida's Sun Shining

As a matter of voter-registration convenience, legislators could crush

the openness of Florida's invaluable system of public records that allows residents to track the actions of governments throughout the state.

In a location such as Polk County, where the two largest cities — Lakeland and Winter Haven — are squeezing the minimum requirements of open government to the limits of propriety and in some cases beyond the limits of law — all that's needed is a hobbled Public Records Law.

The problem started with two bills — HB 247 and SB 1352 — that call for voter registrations to include a line for the voter's email address and to offer to send sample ballots to the voter by email.

Soliciting email addresses, however, raised a concern that those registering to vote would unwillingly provide email addresses that would be public.

BAD-LAW COMPLICATIONS

Thus, the ultimate of unintended consequences in two related bills. HB 249 and SB 1260 are expected to be debated and voted upon Wednesday in the House and Thursday in the Senate, reports The Ledger's Lloyd Dunkelberger in an article today.

These bills would exempt the email addresses of registered voters from the Public Records Law. The addresses would be kept secret.

While the bills' sponsors — Rep. Bryan Nelson, R-Apopka, and Sen. Jeremy Ring, D-Margate — may have intended to limit the exemption to voter email addresses held by supervisors of election, that is not what they wrote in their bills.

Instead, the bills apply to voter email addresses "held by an agency."

As explained Monday to Speaker of the House Will Weatherford and Senate President Don Gaetz in letters from Barbara A. Petersen, president of the First Amendment Foundation, state law defines an agency as "any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission ..." The First Amendment Foundation, Tallahassee, promotes open government.

OVERLY BROAD

"The application of the exemption is much broader than many seem to think," Petersen wrote, "and the negative impact on the public's constitutional right of access will be huge if this bill is allowed to become law."

The upshot is that otherwise-public documents with email addresses of officials from governor to county commissioner to city advisory board member would be exempt because they are voters. Their email addresses would have to be blocked out.

As a result, Petersen wrote to Gaetz and Weatherford, "we will not be able to see who our public officials are communicating with, virtually shutting down any opportunity for public oversight and accountability."

What's more, the expense and complication that would be result from the state having to set up a system to cross-check the email addresses from 67 county election supervisors — and the logjam from government clerks searching for such addresses in documents and redacting them — would make it impractical for residents to obtain public records.

One only needs to look at the recent twisting of open-government laws in Lakeland and Winter Haven to get a hint of the damage crafty officials could cause if these two bills become law.

Consider these recent developments:

In Lakeland, Police Chief Lisa Womack told The Ledger's Jeremy Maready that her department plays a game of "cat and mouse" at times with news reporters requesting public records. The outcome is records being withheld. Following a resulting article and others early this year, a grand jury investigated and produced a report. That presentment is sealed so far.

In Winter Haven, the City Commission several times this year has kept its most controversial issues off of meeting agendas, reported The Ledger's Ryan E. Little, bringing them up for discussion and vote without warning. That limits public input.

Over the past week, City Manager Deric Feacher conducted one-on-one settlement negotiations for a financier with whom the Winter Haven had contracted for a large sale of city land and development of a project called The Landings. In so doing, Feacher kept no records of his talks in this most controversial of city actions — squelching the public's voice on the matter.

For all these reasons and more that bear on open government, the Florida House and Senate should reject these ill-considered bills, HB 249 and SB 1260.



NICK ANDERSON | HOUSTON CHRONICLE

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Taxpayers Should Not Foot Bill for Expensive Tigers Project for Profit

My apologies to fans of baseball's Detroit Tigers and Flying Tigers, I'm sure that this is going to upset them. Granted that the \$40 million figure quoted in John Chambliss' article "Stadium Upgrades Put at Nearly \$40 Million" [April 17] is only a proposed figure and that no vote has been called or scheduled by the City Commission, but I have to voice my opposition to any such expenditure of taxpayer dollars for several reasons.

I question the use of tax dollars to support any private enterprise, which both the Detroit Tigers and the Flying Tigers are. My objection includes subsidies and incentives given to for-profit corporations.

I cannot understand the justification for spending that much money for only 500 to 600 seats. That averages more than \$66,600 per seat if the full 600 seats are actually there and the stadium is still fewer than 10,000 seats.

How many tickets will have to be sold until those seats are paid off?

Included in the proposal are two new clubhouses. Why two? Why not renovate and expand the current clubhouse? This doesn't take in the inevitable cost overruns.

When schools are being short-changed in their budgets because of cuts by the Legislature, and our children's educations are affected, I think that our legislative, and other city, county and state government priorities are seriously skewed in the wrong direction.

ROBERT G. JOHNSON
Lakeland

Remember at Polls

A recent Ledger edition asked for letters to the editor from the residents. This is one of those necessary letters, but I doubt it will be printed. It is a reminder to all registered voters that we must keep a list of all those Congressmen who have openly refused to support any efforts to invoke laws that require extensive gun background checks and to stop the sale of assault weapons and ammunition.

When they are up for re-election, they should be voted out of office permanently with the loss of all pensions and any other benefits, i.e., health insurance. They should not get one more dime of taxpayer money. They can get their support from the NRA, who has been taking care of them.

Remember who they are and vote them out of office. They obviously don't care about the children that were murdered at Sandy Hook or all the innocent people who were killed or maimed for life in Arizona.

It's too bad they cannot be impeached. That's an idea that would get support from all over the country.

DOROTHY CAMERON
Lake Alfred

Ethics Reform Near

As a member of the Florida Commission on Ethics, I am grateful and encouraged that we are on the cusp of dramatic and necessary ethics reform. The Senate, under the leadership of state Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, and Sen. Jack Latvala, R-St. Petersburg, created a strong base on which the House, with the leadership of Speaker of the House Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel and subcommittee chair Sen. Jim Boyd, R-Bradenton, built further improvements. The result, House Bill 7131 is a good work product that, with a few changes, could be a great work product.

News reports suggest that the House, Senate and governor have disagreements over changes to the elections

laws, and that those disagreements are putting HB 7131 in jeopardy.

On behalf of the commission, I urge all the parties not to let differences in philosophy in one arena stand in the way of progress on things we all can agree on. I would also ask that the Legislature make the following changes that would make HB 7131 a true and lasting achievement:

Restore the language that would allow the Commission to record its final order as a lien in cases where there are unpaid fines for failing to file financial disclosure.

Delete the language that allows officials the opportunity to re-do their financial disclosure after a complaint has been filed, or at least make allowing such a second chance discretionary with the Commission.

Give the Commission the ability to investigate complaints on its own initiative, subject to a vote of seven of its nine members.

These three changes will move HB 7131 from good to outstanding. A great deal of hard work by the House and Senate has been poured into ethics reform this year. I encourage the parties to make these three changes, and then make it the law.

MATT CARLUCCI

Commissioner
Florida Commission on Ethics
Tallahassee

Healthy Families Florida

Kiwanians are community leaders and business professionals committed to changing the world, one child and one community at a time. Child abuse can have profound detrimental effects on children's development, resulting in costly consequences for the individual, family and community, which is why we support Healthy Families Florida.

This evidence-based home-visiting program has proved to effectively prevent child abuse in high-risk families at a fraction of the cost of treating the consequences of abuse after it occurs.

We are pleased that the Legislature has maintained Healthy Families Florida funding at its current level of \$18.1 million at this point in the budget process. However, we remain hopeful that if additional resources are available, the Legislature will bring this successful prevention program back to its 2009-2010 funding level of \$28.1 million, or increase the funding as much as possible so more communities and vulnerable families and their children are able to receive these vital services.

By preventing child abuse before it ever begins, we are building a strong foundation for a more prosperous future for our entire state.

ALLEN WHETSELL

Governor
Florida Kiwanis
Tallahassee

WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



Ruth Marcus

THE WASHINGTON POST

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This Time, It Was Terrorist Next Door

The bomber went to prom. OK, alleged bomber. As to those who believe the definite article is missing from the sentence above — the prom — my teenage daughters inform me that phrasing is irredeemably antiquated.

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev probably knew. Indeed, the intriguing — the chilling — aspect of this 19-year-old is his seeming normalcy.

They are different crimes, spawned by different demons. Yet the Boston bombing and the shootings — at Sandy Hook, Aurora, Tucson, Virginia Tech, the list goes on — somehow meld together.

But with a difference. Look at the pictures of Adam Lanza, James Holmes, Jared Lee Loughner, Seung-Hui Cho, and you can imagine the craziness, the disaffection, the just-not-rightness.

Look at Tsarnaev and you see ... a regular-looking kid, one who — to outside appearances — had, like generations of immigrants before him, assimilated quickly and seamlessly. If he smoked pot, he also volunteered with the Best Buddies program and earned a college scholarship.

He looks like the bad boy in a boy band. His version of wildness: driving his car backward down a one-way street at a prom party — an eerie foreshadowing of the Cambridge shootout in which a fleeing Dzhokhar reportedly drove a

Perhaps we will learn to better identify and better handle violent mentally ill people before they act.

stolen SUV over his brother, Tamerlan.

"He was just this scrawny little kid who was always giggling and happy," Juliette Terry, 20, an elementary school friend and part of a group with whom he attended prom, told The Wall Street Journal. "I can't remember him saying a mean word in his life."

Larry Aaronson, a high school teacher at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, told The Boston Globe: "If someone were to ask me what this kid is like, I would say that he had a heart of gold. He was as gracious as possible."

Those are not the comments you would hear about the school shooters. They had histories of psychiatric problems, previous brushes with the law. Their teachers and classmates understood something was off. When the shootings occurred, those who knew them, or had encountered them, instantly suspected the culprit.

But after the Boston bombing, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev went to the campus gym at UMass Dartmouth, partied with soccer friends and chatted calmly about the bombing. "He was saying 'Yeah, you know, it's really a tragedy it's happening right now, it's a sad thing,'" Zach Betten-court, a fellow student, told NBC News.

So remote was the possibility that Tsarnaev was involved that Pamala Rolon, resident assistant in his dorm, told The Globe that, on looking at pictures of the suspect, "We made a joke like — that could be Dzhokhar. But then we thought it just couldn't be him. Dzhokhar? Never."

Tamerlan Tsarnaev was a less surprising bomber, showing signs of alienation and radicalization. "I don't have a single American friend," he said at one point. "I don't understand them."

He became increasingly observant and when the imam at the Cambridge mosque praised Martin Luther King Jr. during a sermon, Tamerlan interrupted, shouting "infidel." His YouTube channel included a song "I will dedicate my life to Jihad."

And, as with other terrorists, there were earlier encounters with law enforcement and warning signs, from a domestic violence call to an FBI investigation, prompted by a request from the Russian security service, of Tamerlan's interest in radical Islam.

Perhaps we will learn to better identify — and, more important, better handle — violent mentally ill people before they act. Perhaps we will improve at avoiding the dropped ball — the Fort Hood shooter's intercepted emails with Anwar al-Awlaki, the failure to search Zacarias Moussaoui's laptop before the Sept. 11 attacks. Perhaps Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was uniquely in the thrall of his older brother.

But Islamic radicalism has gone global. You can learn to build a pressure cooker bomb on the Internet. Sadly, as vigilant as we may be, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is probably not the last terrorist bomber who went to prom.

