

Opinion: The futility of making public officials' home addresses private

CARL GOLDEN | DECEMBER 27, 2022 | [OPINION](#)

Data being removed from government documents will not stop people from finding private information



Carl Golden

Overthinking — the tendency to consider with disproportionate concern a public policy issue or development — is a common affliction in political life. What appears to be a relatively benign matter on the surface takes on greater gravity than it deserves, and draws a response

based on perceived harm rather than actual peril.

Case in point: The package of bills in the Legislature to remove home addresses of a host of public officials, candidates and their immediate family members from official documents, ostensibly as an added protection from potentially personal danger.

Supporters claim it is a necessary step in light of high-profile assaults and harassment of political figures, while opponents warn that scrubbing the address information from publicly accessible documents chips away at transparency to the overall detriment of taxpayers.

In truth, the added privacy and safety provided, or any erosion of governmental openness, would be negligible at best.

A 10-minute scroll through the internet will nearly always yield personal home addresses and, in many cases, maps or aerial views of the neighborhood. There is no guarantee of privacy simply because the data has been removed from

government documents. Whatever transparency currently exists will remain unaffected.

Potential logistical nightmare

With 564 municipal governing bodies, 21 county commissions and more than 600 school boards removing their addresses, those of candidates and family members, would be a logistical and costly nightmare. It would potentially involve thousands of names in such items as voter registration lists, property deeds, tax liens and any documents covered by the state's Open Public Records Act.

It has been suggested further that the legislation apply to appointed officials as well, potentially adding thousands more individuals subject to automatic redaction of home addresses.

While supporters of the proposal press their case that withholding home addresses is a prudent step toward enhancing personal safety, opponents contend it will lead to abuse and potentially corrupt acts by those it covers.

Both are guilty of overthinking. No matter how widespread the redactions may be if the bill becomes law, access to the addresses will remain relatively simple. At the same time, any official considering acting improperly or illegally is not about to be encouraged to do so by the knowledge that his or her home address is shielded from public view.

In the minds of many, the communications revolution has ushered in a brave new world, but to others it has also ushered in a remarkably nosy new world. Either way, the revolution is here to stay and the need to adjust to its reality must be met.

Public office versus personal privacy

Holding or seeking public office has always involved ceding a measure of personal privacy, of opening parts of one's life to scrutiny by voters and the media. It has normally been accepted as part of the trade-off between the need for disclosure of information which might impact job performance and respecting and understanding that there are limits to intrusions on personal matters.

It is not always a clear-cut balancing of interests, and disagreements frequently erupt over exceeding boundaries, either by demands for too much information or by allegations of unwarranted secrecy.

Those who decide to enter public life and to seek the interest and attention of others do so with a clear-eyed understanding of the inevitable loss of some level of privacy. Standing by while others pick through one's personal life can be frustrating and occasionally embarrassing, but — when within reason — is the price exacted to participate in public and political endeavors.

It is naïve to believe that, having voluntarily become a public figure, one is justified in complaining when the public pays attention to you.

It is undeniable that today's political environment has taken a turn for the worse, descending into a toxic brew of vitriol and crude personal assaults that would have been unimaginable not too many years ago.

Commonplace threats

When members of Congress, for instance, use the media reach of their offices to urge using public space to stalk, confront and harass those with whom they disagree or to take part in noisy and occasionally violent street demonstrations outside someone's residence, the understandable response is to provide heightened protective measures.

Threats have become unfortunately commonplace, and it is a phenomenon that tests the abilities of law enforcement and legislators alike to contend with. They cannot be cavalierly dismissed or disregarded as the rantings of angry individuals who have no intention of acting upon them.

Undertaking a massive effort to eliminate mention of home addresses, however, will accomplish little toward deterring a determined individual from obtaining the information. At the same time, the ease of access diminishes the argument that transparency will suffer.

Both factions and the public would be better served to work toward greater specificity in legislators' financial disclosure documents as well as removing the exemption for legislators from OPRA requests.

Overthinking is not in itself a dangerous condition, but it does often distract from dealing forthrightly with larger issues.

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PRIVACY

PUBLIC OFFICIALS

TRANSPARENCY