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Matt Reed: We win in political tribes' 'sunshine war'

BrevardCounty 8:37 a.m. EDT April 3, 2014



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In Satellite Beach, rival political tribes are settling scores and attacking each other for reasons the rest of us can barely fathom. But because Sunshine and demands for public records are their weapons of choice, the rest of us win.

To an outsider, it's like watching Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis bludgeon each other, only not with clubs or machetes but with expensive demands for thousands of officials' personal emails and text messages dating back years.

This Sunshine War between clans — almost all of whom are Republicans who call themselves conservative and mostly want the same things for Satellite Beach — is as expensive as it is stupid. But it's providing a crash course in modern government transparency to hundreds of politicians and board volunteers watching from across Brevard.

"If you're subject to the law, you'd better think twice about firing the first volley," says my friend, Bill Mick, the WMMB radio host and Tutsi sympathizer.

And who knows what we taxpayers might learn about government and politics from the public release of those records?

Expensive clash

A different but equally costly tribal dispute was the recent legal victory by Brevard Clerk of Courts Scott Ellis to pry open records from the publicly funded Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast.

Unlike the pointless feuding in Satellite Beach, this clash mattered. Ellis and his

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attorneys at GrayRobinson urgently need evidence to invalidate a multimillion-dollar contract with BlueWare, a courthouse document contractor named in a corruption case.

As I saw it, any resident had a right to see those records under the Florida Public Records Act and a disclosure clause in the EDC's contract.

But tribal pride dies hard. Because of Ellis and his political camp's history of publicly bashing the EDC — implicating dozens of business owners and executives who serve on its boards — officers there decided the clerk could pry the information from their cold, dead fingers. If he lost, it could set a precedent, making all EDC records off-limits to everyone for good. While Ellis waited, you and I paid.

In the end, we all got something out of the unnecessary fight: Affirmation of our own rights to the records and possible insight into how a company like BlueWare could gain so much influence in Brevard.

Costly reminder

It's unclear what, if anything, will come from the Satellite Beach tribes' weaponization of public-records laws.

There, a Hutu-aligned activist demanded three years' worth of a Tutsi councilwoman's electronic messages related to city business after spotting one or two of them in appendixes in a city document. She is producing them, as required.

But that got the Tutsis mad, so they brought in reinforcements from Melbourne Beach and Suntree. Their counter-raid was a pair of demands for the same type of private-account information from everyone they so much suspect of being Hutu: council members, former council members, even senior citizens serving on city beautification boards.

Don't ask me to take sides here. Except for the fact that they hate each other, I can't tell the difference between any of these people politically. Both camps include nice people, jerks, geniuses and dolts.

But judging by the news coverage, all sorts of them needed a reminder that if you serve government in any official capacity, and you produce any sort of text in a private account discussing any sort of government decision, it's a public record. That goes for text messages, Facebook posts, tweets, even hand-scrawled notes in the margins of faxes.

That reminder alone is a win for residents.

The best response to such a request — if honest — is the same one that would bring the tribal strife to a quicker end in Satellite Beach: "Sorry, I don't have any."

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