

Privacy Concerns

With a few tweaks, bill could help protect identities, right to know

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The Internet has aggravated the clash between privacy rights and the public's right to know. This balancing act likely won't be sorted out for some time; any tug in one direction diminishes the rights on the other side.

Substitute Senate Bill 6, now working its way through the legislature, attempts to address the risk to Ohioans when sensitive personal-identification information is in public view.

This bill, which requires that Social Security numbers be deleted from all public documents, is an understandable response to identity thefts in Ohio, but it could be made better with a couple of adjustments.

For example, mandating that all personal identifiers be deleted from public databases places an enormous burden on Ohio's county recorders. Many will choose to keep real-estate data off the Internet rather than violate Ohio's requirements, said Butler County Recorder Dan Crank, president-elect of the Ohio Recorders Association.

One problem, said Crank, is that software can catch and redact some troublesome identifiers online, but not all. The identifiers posing risks of ID theft include Social Security numbers, bank-account data and taxpayer-ID records.

Crank told a House-Senate committee that manual scanning of millions of records "would require countless employee hours and impose a heavy financial burden in some counties." He added that there's no guarantee of 100 percent accuracy in the redaction process.

A state law enacted last year allows county recorders to refuse documents containing Social Security numbers. That authority for recorders should be extended to documents containing other types of personal-ID information.

In the zeal to keep personal data out of the hands of computer-literate crooks, lawmakers run the risk of shielding too much. An example is the concealing of data regarding public employees.

The bill would ensure that their Social Security numbers are private, and an earlier law conceals the home addresses of many public servants, such as police, firefighters, medics, probation and parole officers and prosecuting attorneys. Exceptions are made when the addresses are sought by journalists, but the general public should enjoy the same access as news people.

Unless the bill is amended to mandate that public officials' dates of birth – often a key identifier – be part of the official roster, cross-referencing of databases by researchers and reporters will be inhibited.

In time, most custodians of public records will require that the filers of public documents remove or encrypt any sensitive personal-ID data. In the interim, state legislators would be wise to remember that, in general, open public records make for a society that is more secure, not less.