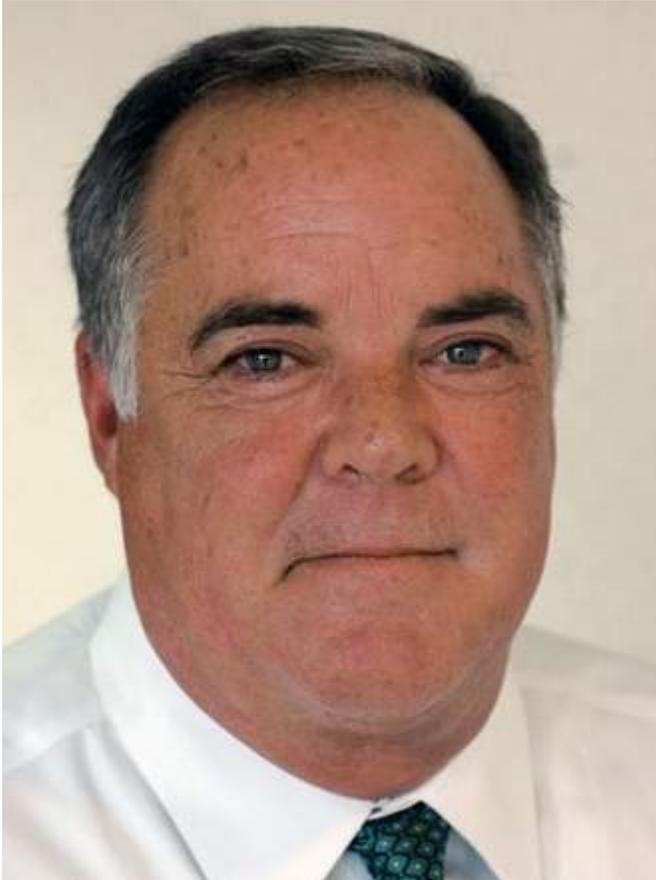


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Editorial: Doug Belden's correct stand on Airbnb

Published: April 28, 2016



Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden. (File photo)

Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden isn't going to sign an agreement with an online home-booking agency, even if it might cost the county tax millions in revenue.

And he is absolutely right.

As the Tribune's Jeff Schweers found, the Florida Department of Revenue and tax collectors in Pinellas and four other counties have signed agreements with Airbnb, a website that rents homes and other private dwellings, that allow state and local tourist taxes to be added to the prices people are charged for rent.

It could be worth millions in revenue.

Nevertheless, Belden won't submit to the company's demand that its agreements with government agencies remain secret.

Belden correctly believes the firm's demand violates the state's public record law.

"Before I sign anything, I am going to be sure it's legal," Belden says. "What they are doing violates Chapter 119 (of Florida statutes)." Belden worries about leaving the public and the media in the dark about the tax-collection arrangements. The state Department of Revenue and Pinellas and other counties are not as conscientious about the public's right to know.

They are more interested in generating additional revenue. That's understandable, but doesn't justify flouting the law.

As Schweers reports, the Department of Revenue refused to provide the Tribune with a copy of its Airbnb agreement. The newspaper managed to obtain a copy from the Palm Beach County Tax Collector's Office, which sued the state agency for a copy of the terms.

It says the tax collector agrees not to communicate with "any other person or entity regarding the terms of and negotiations related to this agreement, including but not limited to the press, on the Internet, or another form of media, except with prior written permission of Airbnb or as is expressly permitted by law."

This is an outrageous abrogation of the law.

Such secrecy, as Belden points out, allows the company to fashion different agreements with different counties.

And as Palm Beach Tax Collector Anne Gannon says, the names and addresses of people renting their homes would be kept secret, even though they should be required to get a business license, register with the county and pay taxes. With secret agreements, there would be no way to tell if they are complying.

And as Belden points out, the secrecy also would keep officials from determining if the renters are violating zoning restrictions by establishing commercial operations in residential areas.

The home-renting industry has been avoiding paying the taxes that other hospitality facilities must pay, so it is understandable that officials would greet Airbnb's efforts to start paying at least a portion of those taxes.

Perhaps a different arrangement for this kind of enterprise can be justified, but all the details should be transparent to the public.

As Belden puts it:

"We need to know it makes sense for taxpayers. It is a public record, period. We can't be involved with being secretive about things the people are entitled to know."