

A Times Editorial

Editorial: Too much secrecy in Airbnb deals

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Overnight visitors who rent rooms in private houses through the online service Airbnb should be paying the same tourism tax as guests in traditional hotels. But a proposed agreement between Hillsborough County and Airbnb would make it all but impossible for local officials to determine whether this tax was being fully and fairly collected. The two sides should negotiate a deal that addresses Airbnb's entry into the market while also protecting taxpayers, and other counties should demand similar openness.

Airbnb and Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden have negotiated for months over a framework for imposing the tourism tax on Airbnb users. Visitors use the online portal to rent individual rooms or even entire homes, an increasingly popular option for travelers who don't want or need a full-service hotel experience. Homeowners say they like the opportunity to meet new people and make extra money. As with other services in the new sharing economy, such as ride-hailing companies Uber and Lyft, this commercialization of private, personal property has outpaced the law and created a host of regulatory questions. Belden is right in seeking to impose the tax. The collection process also needs to be enforceable.

But the proposed agreement, which mirrors contracts Airbnb has with several other large counties in the state, including Pinellas and Orange, would keep key financial information secret, making it virtually impossible for Belden to audit compliance. As it stands, hotels account for their tax receipts and provide detailed records so the state can audit their payments. State law exempts this data from public view, but officials have access to the information they need. The agreement with Airbnb would keep "personally identifiable information" of any guest or host property secret. Belden said that provision would bar him from knowing whether the service was collecting the right amount of tax.

There is no need for this secrecy. Belden's insistence has already moved the ball, as Airbnb reportedly agreed this month to strip confidentiality provisions from the Hillsborough contract. These measures, which other counties needlessly agreed to and violate at least the spirit of Florida's public records law, bar disclosure of "all discussions and negotiations" between the company and the government. The provision is so broad with Orange County that it bars local officials from even responding to press inquiries without Airbnb's prior approval. (The *Tampa Bay Times* obtained Orange's contract after the county cleared it first with Airbnb.)

A reasonable solution is for Airbnb to provide the necessary backup and for public agencies to continue protecting legitimate trade secrets. Belden is right that these contracts fall short, and it's time to demand better.

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