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Did Bucks County block a resident from calling its offices? Blame the toxic COVID masking debate

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In the past two years, we have seen a lot. We all hate the word unprecedented by now, but it really has been one unprecedented moment after another for nearly 24 months of this pandemic.

And we're not talking about just the news. What's been a real game-changer is the debate around the news and the reaction to it. As experienced journalists, we can all tell you about drag out fights and low blows over this big development or that government or school district policy change that we have seen at public meetings, but COVID, masking requirements, changing guidelines in schools, and vaccine policies take discord to another level.

It's ugly. It's personal. And it defies reason, and is not calmed by facts or time.

On Wednesday, when a Bucks County resident, who has often challenged officials on masking guidelines in schools and the process of their decision making, at a county commissioners meeting claimed the county government had blocked her phone number and was unable to get through to any county offices, we noticed. It felt extreme. It felt wrong. And it felt un-American.

In this very meeting, the commissioners touted their commitment and progress on open, transparent and accessible government. How could these same officials sanction a taxpayer being blocked from calling all county government offices?

We didn't take the claim lightly. We don't take any action to block access to government lightly. A private citizen should be able to call into elected officials' and government administrative offices.

But, we had questions. Was it true? And how the heck, if true, did we get here as a community? And in terms of our coverage, was this another jolt on the emotional roller coaster of knowing no matter how we play (or don't play) this story, we would be highly criticized?

“Hang tight,” was Executive Editor Shane Fitzgerald's response as we worked to determine if we had a story before the meeting even ended. “It probably is, though.”

We suspected we knew some of the answers we were seeking as we have watched the masking debate and how decisions were made in Bucks devolve into more personal and political fights and attacks over the past several months.

Another parent, also a frequent critic of the commissioners, said during public comment she “had been bullied” by the county since she and others started asking questions in August when the county changed its guideline on masks in schools.

Blocking a citizen sadly seemed to be the next in this toxic dynamic we as a community are caught in. The “Why did they do that?” question was worthy of taking a breath and not rushing to judgment.

We worked to confirm if the number was blocked and, if so, why. After getting the backstory, we talked about the “damned if we do, damned if we don't” coverage decision we had before us.

Since last summer, and really before that, COVID has ripped us apart as a community. Dramatic, yes. But, it's true.

Both sides of the masking debate — and for some how masks came to be required in many Bucks school districts — are passionate, outspoken, armed with what both will tell you are indisputable facts. They have charts and figures and government emails from hundreds of right-to-know requests. They have social media — the followers and the likes — to prove, they feel, their opposing points are valid and what the people want.

Each side says it wants calm and reason to prevail, but often it seems like they have lost sight of that goal and just want to be right — no matter the facts.

There has been name-calling, charges and lawsuits filed and accusations flung. We've seen elected officials resign. Others say they have been threatened due to their votes on masking. Instead of civil discussions, it's shouting at meetings, snarky comments on social media and passive-aggressive emails. It's exhausting.

We, in the newsroom alone, have been called hacks, liars, sensationalists, racists, anti-Semites and more — all stemming from coverage of the coronavirus. It stings.

The county, and the commissioners specifically, have been under attack for its masking guidelines and decision making that some say was more politically driven than supported by the COVID picture here.

County Commissioner Diane Marseglia on Wednesday said blocking the resident's number was intended to be for only one direct number, from a front-line staff member who routinely returns constituents' calls. That staff member, who had talked with this parent several times, said she couldn't take the extensive verbal abuse anymore.

Marseglia said the county's IT department didn't realize the block covered all the incoming office lines. She said the line was unblocked Wednesday after the meeting. She noted it was blocked months ago and the parent routinely stayed in contact with the commissioners through Right-To-Know Law requests, attendance at commissioners' meetings and had access beyond making a phone call.

We don't see the upside to naming the parent or the county employee who ended up in a place where she couldn't stand the thought of talking with this resident again. Neither deserves what probably would come their way.

That parent is part of a vocal and determined group to find out why the county changed guidance in its COVID protocols for schools in August. That group doesn't believe the county's explanations and have demanded answers and information.

They use social media, right-to-know-requests, frequent calls, emails and meeting appearances to further their cause. They will not be deterred and have found support in the divisive nature of the debate over COVID and its fallout.

They have repeatedly asked the same of the newspaper and challenged our coverage for months.

We ask tough questions. We analyze the data. We talk to both sides. Facts are still disputed and our motives questioned.

The fight over masking in schools in Bucks County has even made national news.

So how do we stop this unproductive cycle and move forward? We are better than this.

No matter the politics, conspiracy theories, government missteps and opposing views, we as

a community need to move on. We need to recover from this pandemic and all its losses.

Our kids need to make up for proven learning loss. Our mental health, and that of our children, needs time to process and heal. Our businesses need to stabilize and grow.

Blocking or impeding those efforts is wrong. If we put the energy into any or all of those things, Bucks County could make national news once again — not in our worst moments, but for the best of who we are.

We know a segment of people won't believe Marseglia. But in light of where we are right now on this subject, it's easy to understand how public officials and their staff members can get to a point where enough is enough. Maybe it's not a good look for the county in one sense. But it's a good look that the county supported one of its employees who doesn't deserve the verbal onslaughts.

We're all tired. We all want this to be over — masks and all.

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