



IN OUR OPINION

## **Editorial: The power of information**

Published: Thursday, May 24, 2012 at 6:30 a.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, May 23, 2012 at 8:37 p.m.

Having a reasonably clear and timely picture of our communities' demographic makeups, it appears, is something most Americans think is important, regardless of their political and socioeconomic stripes.

Everyone, that is, except U.S. Rep. Daniel Webster, the Orlando Republican who represents eastern Marion County.

How else to explain Webster's recent sponsorship of an amendment to the U.S. Department of Commerce budget that led to a House vote that would block the U.S. Census Bureau from conducting its American Community Survey?

Each year, that survey goes out to about 3 million random households.

It is an attempt to gather relevant, real-time age, race, health, housing and other demographic data.

Why? Well, for one thing, numerous federal laws dictate that states, cities and counties take such demographic information into account when spending hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funds on everything from health care and roads to housing and education. So why stop collecting such data?

Because, says Webster, it "is another example of government overreach into the privacy of hard-working taxpayers." It is, Webster further insists, "intrusive" and "unconstitutional."

That latter point is debatable. Suffice it to say that, thus far, the Census Bureau has not been barred on constitutional grounds from collecting such data.

The House vote "devastates the nation's statistical information about the status of the economy and the larger society," said Robert Groves, director of the Census Bureau. "Modern societies need current, detailed social and economic statistics. The U.S. is losing them."

Turns out Groves is not alone in his assessment. Since the vote on Webster's amendment, which largely followed party lines, the measure has received an avalanche of criticism from all sides — from The New York Times to the Wall Street Journal, from the Brookings Institute to the Cato Institute, from liberals to conservatives.

The bottom line is governments and businesses, big and small, depend on the ACS for real-time snapshots of how their communities are growing and changing. It is reliable market information that allows the public and private sectors to better serve their clientele.

Webster, a champion of small business, should have asked his own constituencies before shooting from the hip on this one.

The good news is that the Senate is unlikely to go along with the House on this one. But the larger question is, in the Information Age why would Congress adopt such an ignorance-is-bliss policy, one that leaves government — and private businesses — in the dark when it comes to spending their dollars most effectively?

Information, lest the congressman need reminding, is power, and the ACS provides vital market information that can make for smarter, more strategic decisions.

And while Webster was quick to point out that the survey costs money to conduct, he failed to follow through and find out how much it benefits, and ultimately profits, those who utilize its findings.

Pushing for less knowledge about who we are and how we live makes no sense, plain and simple.