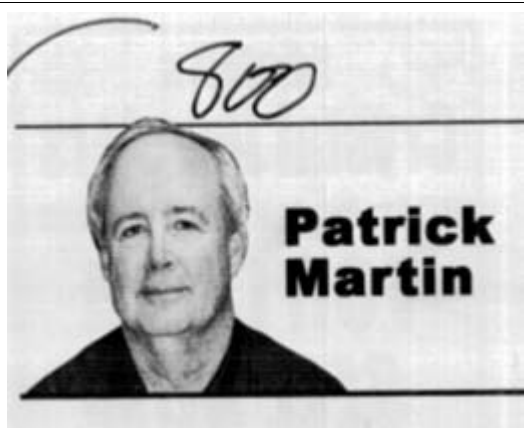


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## Rock Ambulance, 911: It's hip to cite HIPAA when they want to clam up

In the world of emergency services, some information is so critical and private that it must be guarded like the president.

Until the television cameras show up, that is.

Last week the Jefferson County 911's public relations director, Geri Mayer, whose husband, Paul, is a 911 board member, called the *Leader* to pitch a story about how a woman was saved because 911 was able to locate her flipped car by using the agency's new GPS cell technology.

That's part of what taxpayers agreed to buy when they passed a half-cent sales tax for 911 in 2009. Remember that one? The 911 board spent about \$200,000 in taxpayer money for an election and an "information" campaign to educate voters why they needed to tax themselves further to support 911.

Anyway, a story's a story, except that when reporter Peggy Scott asked Mayer for the woman's name and contact information to do an interview, Mayer said she'd have to get back to her.

Which she didn't.

Mayer said she couldn't give the woman's name because it would be a HIPAA violation. HIPAA is the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. Part of the act deals with patient privacy, which is why you have to sign HIPAA release forms every time you visit a new doctor. It's so the labs and doctors can talk about you and trade information.

Anyway, Mayer had this grave HIPAA concern, so imagine our surprise when that very same night she was on at least two St. Louis television stations, with the

woman, telling the story.

I didn't see the reports, so perhaps the woman had a bag over her head to protect her identity. But I doubt it.

One of the stations helpfully led the story with something to the effect of, "Sometimes taxpayer money gets wasted, but sometimes it saves lives."

Geri Mayer, as the taxpayer-paid shill for 911, couldn't have written it better herself.

I'm certain the fact that the *Leader* outed 911 on its "information campaign" and refers to your correspondent as "Rat Martin" in internal documents had nothing to do with the freeze-out. I'm just curious why Mayer called us in the first place.

Whatever. This is the latest example of control-freak behavior when it comes to information hoarding, as practiced by emergency service agencies.

As bad as this was, it wasn't as outrageous as recent actions by the Rock Township Ambulance District, which, believe it or not, refused to tell a *Leader* reporter on the telephone the location of the district's ambulance houses. Yes, refused to give the addresses.

They must be secret ambulance houses!

This is the same district that is refusing to reveal the number of ambulance calls it makes to the new Arnold Commons shopping mall. It refused by saying – surprise! – that it would be a HIPAA violation.

That aspect of the law has bitten reporters in the notebook ever since emergency agencies figured out they can cite it whenever they don't feel like telling reporters anything they don't want to tell them. Like the location of an ambulance house, I guess.

Anyway, even though we didn't ask Rock Ambulance for any names of patients, employees or anything like that, it refused to tell us how many calls it had run to Arnold Commons on the basis that it would be a HIPAA violation.

It also refused to give the same





information to the city of Arnold. That's where it gets even more interesting.

Rock Ambulance is in a urinating contest with the city over a tax giveback. The city promised the developers of Arnold Commons a giveback called a Tax Increment Financing district. In a TIF, taxes from the new project, instead of going to taxing entities such as the city, school, fire or ambulance districts, are used to pay for site improvements the developer otherwise would have to pay for.

Rock Township Ambulance refused to go along, saying it would have SO MANY more calls to the new shopping center that it couldn't afford to forego the new taxes it would receive.

And now, it refuses to give up the number of new calls it is making there. Somehow, Rock Township believes doing so would be a HIPAA violation. Anyone who buys that one, please call me – I have swampland for sale in the Bootheel I'd like to show you.

The scenario is complicated even

more by the tangled relationship and inbreeding between the city and Rock Township. Mayor Ron Counts, in his 2009 quest to become mayor, criticized the way eminent domain was used to build the shopping center. Counts is on the Board of Directors at Rock Township and is also the treasurer.

Arnold Councilman Randy Crisler, who has been a critic of Counts during his 10 months as mayor, is now running for a seat on the ambulance board. Coincidentally, Counts is one of two incumbents seeking re-election.

One big, happy, information-clutching family.

All we know is, when it comes to the public getting information from these people (whose salaries are paid by taxes), it's like trying to blow a hole in Fort Knox.

Approve sales taxes for us, pay us property taxes, but don't ask any questions.

Now, *there's* a legitimate reason for a Tea Party.

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