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## Parking Tickets and School Bonds

*Suzanne J. Piotrowski*

The *Madison Post* is the local hometown newspaper. Hometown may be a bit of a misnomer since Madison City is a municipality with a quarter of a million people. Maria Gurule has worked as a reporter at the *Madison Post* for 15 years and for the past 10 has concentrated on city management concerns and local politics. Monday morning at 8:30 Maria rings Patricia Stoltz, the public affairs officer for Madison City.

The conversation is friendly. Maria and Patricia have known each other for more than 5 years. Maria quickly gets to the point of her call. "I understand Madison City's Office of the Treasurer has a database of outstanding unpaid parking tickets. I would like to get a copy of the database."

Patricia asks, "Would you formalize your request by writing a letter asking for the database?" Patricia knows she is required to respond to Maria within 5 business days of receiving a written request. She reminds Maria, "Legally I have five days to respond to your request. I can let you know more on Friday. Most likely I'll have the data for you then."

An intern from the *Madison Post* drops off the formal request letter later that day.

It was going to be a hectic Monday for Patricia. The day would end with a meeting on the upcoming school bond referendum chaired by the city manager, Harry Gersh. Madison City schools require major capital expenditures to be brought up to code. A similar bond referendum was defeated narrowly last year. Both Patricia and Harry feel that with some good community outreach the referendum will pass. A town meeting on the subject is scheduled for next week. Harry, Patricia, and the entire school board will be there. Patricia hopes this year the referendum will pass.

It isn't until 11 A.M. on Tuesday that Patricia reads over Maria's request letter and starts to operationalize the task. She walks down the hall to the treasurer's office and asks the deputy treasurer about the database. Indeed there is one and it is enormous. A quick review shows that there are more than 5,000 outstanding parking tickets from the past 5 years alone. Many of the outstanding tickets are from the past 3 months, so while they are technically overdue, the offenders still could pay the tickets with just a small penalty. The database also includes the home addresses, phone numbers, and personal identifiers of the individuals who own the cars that were ticketed.

Patricia calls Maria on her cell phone that afternoon. "Could you give me a better idea of what you are looking for?" asks Patricia. "The database includes an enormous number of outstanding tickets, some of which are newly issued. Also, the file includes personal identifiers and I am not even sure if all the information is releasable."

Maria responds, "Really, I am just looking for big-time offenders. If you give me a list of everyone who owes more than \$250 in parking tickets that would satisfy my request. Also, I only really need their names and addresses." Since Maria had made information requests before, she knew her right to receive the database in electronic form.

The two chat for a few more minutes when Maria offers the impetus for the request. A neighboring municipality had similar information published, and it turned out some local business owners were racking up huge parking ticket bills and never paying them. Maria was interested if she would find the same. She intended to post the dataset on the *Madison Post's* Web site.

Wednesday morning Patricia consults the city's attorney, and Maria was correct. She could receive the information in electronic form. Also, there are no restrictions on what a person could do with government documents once they are released. Maria could legally post the information on the Web site. The dataset would have to be redacted, though, in order to release the requested information without the personal identifiers such as social security numbers.

The city's attorney makes it clear that the release of these data would violate individuals' right to privacy. The attorney also states that "Madison City is only obligated to incur *reasonable costs* in the process of making documents available for release. Reasonable cost isn't defined, though. You just need to use your best judgment."

Patricia thinks that redacting the database wouldn't take more than a day of labor, and this is a reasonable cost. Patricia has always considered

herself an advocate of transparency. She can't see any reason not to release the dataset. Anyway, Maria had piqued her interest. Whose names would be on the list?

Again Patricia walks down the hall to the treasurer's office. She is told that the job will take at least 2 full days of work and will probably be completed by Friday around noon. Patricia still thinks that this is a reasonable cost and asks that the treasurer's office go ahead with the project. She tells the deputy treasurer, "There may be some interesting names on this list. Let me know if anyone of note pops up."

Friday is another busy day for Patricia. She has a 4 P.M. appointment planned with the town manager to prepare for next Wednesday's meeting on the bond referendum. She knows Maria will be calling this afternoon as well. While she doesn't have to produce the database today, she needs to let her know when it will be available.

She checks in with the deputy treasurer.

The database is almost ready for release, but there are still a couple more hours of work that need to be done. Unfortunately, the person who is working on the database has Friday afternoons off. It will have to be finished on Monday. Patricia then inquires if after looking through the database any local business owners' names were on the list. The deputy treasurer explains, "I didn't see any local business owners, but there were a few surprises. Three of the school board members have outstanding tickets totaling over \$250. One actually owes \$1,100! So far there are a few other city officials on the list too."

Patricia walks away in a bit of shock. If this information got out, it would probably derail the school bond referendum. She could see next week's town meeting focusing on the unpaid parking tickets, not the much needed school repairs. What should she do? Did another few hours of work count as unreasonable costs? The majority of the project was already completed, though. The dataset would be ready on Monday. Should she release the information before the town meeting? Could she wait and release it at the end of next week after the meeting? She will see Harry that afternoon. Should she ask the city manager what to do? Would this be getting him involved unnecessarily?

Patricia has 3 hours to decide. She has to respond to Maria by 5 P.M. today.

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