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LOCAL

U.S. Rep. Scott Franklin's phone-in events are open to all on his list

Gary White The Ledger

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Rep. Scott Franklin, R-Lakeland, and Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota. Submitted

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U.S. Rep. Scott Franklin differs from Polk County's other two representatives on his approach to town halls as well as social media.

Traditionally, House members held public meetings in their districts during the August recess. That custom began to wane more than a decade ago, as town halls grew increasingly rancorous and unruly, prompting many representatives to stop holding them, and the COVID-19 pandemic further depressed the tradition of communal meetings.

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Instead, all three Polk County representatives have held some form of virtual town halls this year.

Rep. Darren Soto, D-Kissimmee has held at least six such discussions since

February, hosting them through the video platform Zoom and streaming them on Facebook Live. Soto's staff typically promotes the events about a week in advance, spokeswoman Belén Sassone said.

Soto hosted a video session last week that lasted 2½ hours. His staff posts the conversations online so that constituents who miss them can watch later, Sassone said.

Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota has held five public discussions this year, press assistant Alex Enlow said, including online events and telephone town halls. Steube's staff promotes the events in advance on all of his official platforms, Enlow said, and posts recordings online afterward.

Franklin has exclusively held telephone town halls, hiring a vendor to manage the events. Franklin's office does not advertise the sessions in advance or post a number for constituents to call. Instead, the vendor makes automated calls to constituents shortly before the events, usually held at 7 p.m., said Russ Read, Franklin's communications director.

Read said that Franklin's unpredictable schedule makes it risky to schedule an event and then have to cancel on the vendor.

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Read didn't offer details on the phone list Franklin's office uses for invitations but said it includes residents of varying party affiliation. He said constituents can call Franklin's office and ask to be added to the list.

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For those who don't answer the automated calls, the platform leaves a message inviting them to call in to the town hall.

The events typically draw between 2,000 and 4,000 participants, Read said, and last about 45 minutes, enough time for about 15 calls. Asked who determines which calls go through, Read said he couldn't discuss internal office operations.

Franklin's staff doesn't appear to post recordings of the town halls for later listening.

In an emailed statement, Franklin said the phone platform has the potential to reach 50,000 people at a time. He said he plans to schedule at least one phone session a month going forward.

"We've had great conversations with a wide variety of folks during these events, ranging from a young man who was concerned about the future of our country to an older gentleman who has lived in Polk County for decades," Franklin wrote. "Sometimes we agree and sometimes we don't, but I always appreciate these discussions."

Josh Scacco, an associate professor of communication at the University of South Florida, said Franklin's approach to telephone town halls "seems highly selective." Holding events in the evening without advanced notice could limit the participation.

"If you're giving 15 or 20 minutes, you're probably getting individuals who have more flexibility in the evenings, who probably don't have kids, aren't working or coming home from work," he said. "So, an older demographic that leans retired. What does that mean for the types of questions and types of individual supporters you might be getting? We know in Florida older individuals tend to lean Republican. So is that potentially then culling a friendly audience?"

Linda Steniford of Lakeland said she thinks Franklin should publicize the town halls if he wants to hear from all constituents.

"That's not open communication, either," she said. "He doesn't announce them on Twitter. He doesn't announce them on Facebook. It's kind of like he's wanting to hide it."

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