OPINION

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OPINION PAGE: THE MISSION

The aim of the opinion page is to publish a diversity of opinions from journalists, columnists, subject matter experts and readers to foster discussion and solution-seeking to improve the lives of Savannah-area residents.

Jill Nevels-Haun, executive editor



Your Turn
Collier Neeley
Guest columnist

Savannah's preservation voice may be on the chopping block

In 1966, the federal government passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), approving landmark legislation that codified and structured America's historic preservation movement, underscoring the importance of protecting our nation's history. The federal government also created a clear process, known as Section 106, that requires federal agencies to review and mitigate potential negative impacts of federally funded projects on historic resources.

The National Historic Preservation Act created a promise to save the places that are important to our nation's history and provided the structure for the federal government to engage with state and local partners and to provide the resources necessary to document that history, so that it may be shared, understood, and appreciated. Through the National Historic Preservation Act, we have been able to save, renovate, and repurpose America's historic places while documenting the history of communities across the country. Section 106 is often used to identify this history and these places, providing important information to add sites to the National Register, utilize historic tax credits, support local communities, and learn from our shared past. It does not stop projects.

The National Historic Preservation Act also created the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP), an independent agency charged with advising the president and Congress on preservation policy. This summer, the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation set out to rewrite the rules around Section 106 in an effort to streamline the review process to accelerate federal projects.

On July 17th, the ACHP issued troubling revisions to Section 106 that drastically change how federal government agencies and their partners evaluate historic places as well as the impacts they face from federal projects. If implemented, these new rules would dramatically diminish the effectiveness of the NHPA as well as the current legal protections for historic and cultural places.

Currently, federal agencies work with state and local partners to evaluate the history of places, understand the potential impacts of federal investment, and then mitigate those impacts together through various projects like resource surveys, oral history projects, or public history exhibits. With these latest rule changes, state and local partners are cut out of the process, giving federal agencies unilateral authority to evaluate and mitigate impacts. State and local partners would no longer have the right to be notified or the opportunity to comment when federal agencies propose to damage or destroy historic places within their jurisdiction.

The recent changes also restrict the type of projects that require Section 106 review to those directly administered by federal agencies, excluding projects and programs administered by state and local agencies, like housing authorities. In the past, Section 106 required agencies to evaluate the historic resources in a project area and engage the public through partnership with state and local groups, revealing countless stories and places that would have been lost to time had it not been for this collaborative process. The latest Section 106 rule changes remove local participation, centralize decision-making within federal agencies, and ultimately threaten local communities' opportunity to learn about and preserve their history.

The Advisory Council for Historic Preservation approved these rule changes on July 24th, and they are now being reviewed before being posted for public comment. That doesn't mean we have to wait. There are several things you can do right now.

First, inform yourself. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Council for State Historic Preservation Offices, and Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation all have specific details about these changes and their potential impacts. I encourage you to visit their websites to learn more.

Second, email Buddy Carter, our congressional representative, as well as Sens. Raphael Warnock and John Ossoff, and ask them to work through legislative processes to block these changes and preserve coastal Georgia's history. Lastly, be prepared to leave a public comment once the opportunity is open.

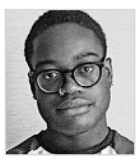
If Section 106 changes are implemented, historic sites in Savannah could be threatened by federal development, with no state or local recourse. We can't stand on the sidelines and allow the federal government to break the promise it made in 1966 through the National Historic Preservation Act. We need to speak up now to protect Savannah's remarkable legacy of preservation and to preserve America's rich history for future generations.

– Collier Neeley is the president and CEO of Historic Savannah Foundation.



A Flock Safety Falcon camera stands watch along the Ohio River Scenic Byway in downtown Evansville on Jan. 6, 2025. The cameras are the first link in a nationwide surveillance network tracking Americans' movements. HOUSTON HARWOOD/USA TODAY NETWORK VIA IMAGN IMAGES

Can we still party with everyone watching?



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"MASS SURVEILLANCE PREDATOR GLASSES"

There it was, plastered in bold, white letters on a poster on 14th Street, a particularly buzzy strip in Washington, DC, lined with bars, clubs and a Jeni's Ice Creams blissfully opened until 1 a.m. on weekends.

Despite its satire, the spoof advertisement shows the reality of Ray-Ban Meta artificial intelligence glasses as a dangerous tool of our growing surveillance state by allowing wearers to slyly record anything – and anyone – they see. This poster stopped me in my tracks because its nihilism – or existentialism, even – belies a sense of cool.

Lifted from an actual Meta campaign, the poster's image includes a close-up of Kylie Jenner's face, adorned with said Ray-Ban Meta shades, her mouth agape, revealing star stickers stuck to her tongue. Her blacked-out sunglasses are sleek and trendy among stylish youth, and the tongue stickers resemble pimple patches that have become a sort of face accessory for that same demographic.

Perhaps the "chic-est" thing about this image is its covert message: Jenner's eyes may be unseen, but she's still surveilling you.

It's the appeal to cool that makes this image so unnerving. The Meta glasses aren't being depicted as a ground-breaking technology, but another tech-y accessory for the masses – the youths, in particular.

Surveillance culture may have been incited by Big Tech, but it is proliferated by us. This ad isn't selling anything new; it's reflecting a culture that already exists. We've become our own Big Brother.

Flock cameras, Ring doorbells, TikTok videos: Someone is always recording

When I looked to the right of the poster, I saw a group of boys drunkenly zigzagging down the sidewalk, trying not to trip over themselves. Earlier that night, a girl was throwing up on the street, her friend holding back her hair. Someone wearing a pair of Meta glasses could unknowingly record these intimate, embarrassing moments and post them online for the world to see.

It's that possibility – of having an ephemeral moment thrust into internet infamy without consent – that makes a culture of surveillance so disturbing in the digital age.

It's not just glasses with hidden cameras, either.

Flock Safety has employed automatic license plate readers in cities across the country, with few regulations or oversight on how the data can be used. These cameras have already been used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement to go after immigrants without warrants.

Amazon's Ring "smart" doorbell cameras have turned neighbors into cops by allowing law enforcement to request biometric identification from consumer devices (despite advertising their software as an altruistic lost dog finder).

As I, and many other 20-somethings, poured in and out of various bars and clubs, I found myself struggling to navigate this Orwellian reality. I peered inquisitively at anyone with a suspicious pair of glasses. I obscured my face when I thought I was in the background of someone's video. Even when there was no camera visible, I made sure to look presentable enough not to be embarrassed if pictures and videos of me ended up online anyway.

Coming of age in the social media era already presents a bevy of issues based on the bits of ourselves we share willingly: constant comparison with unrealistic standards, an algorithm that puts us in self-destructive echo chambers and limits our worldview, a culture of oversharing that opens users to bullying and harassment.

Anyone with an unhealthy screen time knows how largely innocuous moments, often recorded and posted without the depicted party's consent, become fodder for the infinite discourse wheel. An entire person is flattened into a clip and picked apart by a punitive and carceral internet that hides its parasocial tendencies behind altruism.

Dance like everyone is watching – because they are

Watching this happen repeatedly to young people is distressing as a young person myself. It's scary to think that your personhood can be stripped during a volatile period of self-discovery. It's even scarier to think the internet knows you better than you know yourself.

This perpetual anxiety of unfettered perception affects the way many Gen Zers (those born between 1997 and 2012) move about the world – especially the way we have fun. It's a common observation that no one dances at clubs or bars anymore, and it's not implausible to blame this on surveillance culture.

A consequence of our aversion to cringe and formative years spent in social isolation, the possibility of the entire internet seeing a few seconds of "bad" dancing is nightmare fuel. Never mind that getting down and dirty is pretty ugly; such an unaesthetic act doesn't mesh well with a generation obsessed with nonchalance.

But can we really be blamed? At this point, being reserved in public is an act of self-preservation.

The most plausible way to combat a culture of surveillance – and create spaces where people are free to express themselves without judgment – is to create a culture that ardently rejects it. Singer songwriter Phoebe Bridgers announced that phones will be banned at her upcoming tour. A new club opened across town that also bans phones.

Maybe I'll find peace there.

Kofi Mframa is a columnist and digital producer for USA TODAY.