Greene, R. (2007). *If L.A. County Supervisor Yvonne Burke would rather live in a tonier district fine—she's free to relinquish her seat.* http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-greene28jul28,1,3890051,print.story?ctrack=1&cset=true, Retrieved July 29, 2007. Los Angeles Times, July 28, 2007.

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If L.A. County Supervisor Yvonne Burke would rather live in a tonier district, fine -- she's free to relinquish her seat

By By Robert Greene, Times Staff Writer

Pity our hapless elected officials, who are simply trying to live their lives, take their pay and shuttle among their multiple houses.

Now they have reporters stalking them, confronting them with their inconsistencies and trying to find out if they are breaking the law. It's too much to take. Right?

Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, according to an L.A. Times story, has been spending her nights not in the district she has represented for 15 years but five miles away in Brentwood, a place that is, as the euphemism goes, nicer.

Times reporters Jack Leonard and Matt Lait reported Friday that Burke has been observed in the evenings at her Brentwood home, which is in County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky's Westside/Valley jurisdiction. In the morning, she drives to her own South Los Angeles district -- just the edge of it, actually, to her Mar Vista townhouse. Then she hangs around for about five minutes and is picked up by her county-paid driver, who takes her the rest of the way to work downtown. She reportedly reverses the circuit at the end of the day, having her driver drop her off for another brief visit in Mar Vista, where she climbs back into her Chrysler and returns to her Mandeville Canyon home, with its tennis court and swimming pool, in Brentwood.

Burke said her primary residence was in Mar Vista and then, according to the story, reversed herself and said she hadn't spent much time there since buying the place a year ago. Then she released a statement asserting that, no, she always maintained her primary residence in the district. (At least she didn't have her driver drop her off at the out-of-district home. That shows care and attention to detail. You almost want to pat her on the back.)

There are all kinds of excuses to lob in defense of Burke. She's serving out the home stretch of her term (she'll leave the board near the end of next year); she's 74, leave her alone; everyone does it. But none of them wash.

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To begin with, the law requires county supervisors to live in the districts they represent. Any elected official (like any citizen) has a fundamental duty to obey the law whether they agree with it or not. That's a concept with which Burke -- an active attorney since 1956, a former candidate for state attorney general, a former member of Congress -- should be familiar.

Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley has prosecuted at least four candidates or elected officials in the county for breaking the residency law. A jury convicted Huntington Park City Councilwoman Linda Guevara of perjury and filing false candidacy papers after finding she never lived in Huntington Park but used her mother's address as a front while actually living in Downey. East Los Angeles resident Richard Mayer didn't even win his race for the South Gate City Council, but a jury convicted him after finding that he paid a South Gate resident $200 to use his address on candidacy papers. Peter Sabatino Jr. was elected to the West Covina Unified School District board but pleaded guilty to a perjury charge when prosecutors found he lived in Downey. A case is still pending against former Vernon Mayor Leonis Malburg, his wife and his son, who the district attorney's office alleges voted in Vernon while living in Los Angeles.

It's not clear yet whether Cooley would prosecute a member of the Board of Supervisors, which controls much of his budget.

It's easy to shrug and say breaking the residency law is no big deal. Isn't politics a big fix anyway? Districts are divvied up by the political parties, which then designate and fund favored candidates, who then win their elections in the primaries. Candidates find available districts, then move in just before filing time. Or, perhaps, they rent apartments in the districts they hope to represent, then hang on to them and maybe spend a few nights there to make everything look legal. Why demand that they go through the charade? Isn't there now a separate, connected, elite political class that can use clever campaigns or celebrity status to appeal to voters in far-flung rural or gritty urban districts without the inconvenience of forging actual residential connections there?

But that cynical approach throws in the towel on important notions undergirding our democracy: that the law counts and elected officials must obey it; that citizens are not just consumers of government services but owners; and that people in every neighborhood have the wisdom not just to vote but to participate in government.

It may turn out that Burke broke no law, that under carefully nuanced legal analyses, she technically retained her 2nd District residency while sleeping elsewhere during the rehab of her Mar Vista townhouse.

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Should she still be criticized for spending so much time in Brentwood, or even for "living" in Mar Vista, far from the heart of her district and its urgent problems -- persistent stretches of poverty, poor schools, the meltdown at Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital?

That's a political decision for her constituents. Or it would be if Burke wasn't retiring next year anyway.

But if, under the law, Burke ceased to be a resident of her district, all of the excuses -- her age, the short amount of time left in her tenure -- fail. Her office must be declared vacant, and her constituents must try again with, it is hoped, someone who truly lives among them.

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