

Texas businesses fear major boycotts over SB 4

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Photo: Stephen Spillman / Stephen Spillman

AUSTIN — With the highly anticipated court fights over Texas’ sanctuary cities ban officially underway — and decisions not expected for months — concerns continue over the potential for major national boycotts of the state.

To date, fallout directly related to the law, Senate Bill 4, has come from groups that are not traditional political allies of the state’s Republican leaders, who have brushed off concerns that the law will prompt boycotts that could hurt Texas cities’ economies in the long term as the court battles play out. Despite the lack of widespread action so far, some of the nation’s largest immigrant and

civil rights groups say they are still considering organizing a nationwide boycott of Texas, which could pressure companies to pull their business from the state.

Senate Bill 4 will take effect Sept. 1 and allow local police officers to inquire about the immigration status of people they legally detain or arrest. It also would punish elected officials who do not honor every request from federal immigration authorities to hold a person until their status can be investigated. Officials who do not comply, from police chiefs to county sheriffs, can be charged with a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by a \$1,000 fine for a first offense and up to \$25,000 for each infraction that follows. They could be removed from office, as well.

The American Civil Liberties Union, a frequent foe of Gov. Greg Abbott in court, issued a travel advisory last month that warned visitors to Texas of potential constitutional rights violations because of SB 4. It is not an official boycott, the group said, but a broad alert to travelers that “it is simply a matter of time before illegal arrests occur.”

Echoing an argument made by Democrats in the state Legislature as they unsuccessfully tried to defeat the measure, the ACLU’s warning said the law will give some police officers license to racially profile people and find a reason to detain them in order to inquire about their immigration status.

“Until we defeat it, everyone traveling in or to Texas needs to be aware of what’s in store for them,” said Terri Burke, executive director of the ACLU of Texas. “Local law enforcement will have to decide between violating a person’s rights and being severely fined, thrown in jail or even being removed from office for choosing not to do so.”

Abbott and other supporters of the law have maintained that it will boost public safety and mandate that local law enforcement agencies cannot enforce patchwork policies on whether their officers will ask a person they stop to prove they are in the country legally. Police chiefs in the state’s largest cities have fiercely disputed the Republicans’ public safety argument, saying that the law strips considerable power from local officials to run their departments as they see fit.

Texas’ urban centers are not the only areas seeing early negative fallout from SB 4.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association pulled its 2018 conference from Grapevine, a Dallas-area suburb in Tarrant County, in part because

organizers feared the law would dissuade noncitizen members and racial minorities from attending and, in some cases, bringing their families.

“Our members are U.S. citizens and green card holders, but many of them come from ethnic communities where they felt that they would be unfairly targeted,” said Bill Stock, the president of the association, which has yet to announce where it will hold next year’s meeting. “(The members) expressed their desire not to spend money in the state.”

The 2018 convention, which AILA scheduled in Texas years before SB 4’s passage, usually draws upwards of 3,000 attendees each year, constituting the country’s largest gathering of attorneys and law professors who focus on immigration law.

From the conservative-voting Tarrant County to the state’s progressive capital city, even organizations that do not fully pull out of Texas could be forced to change their events after the law is scheduled to take effect in September.

South by Southwest is still scheduled for March 9-18, 2018, in Austin, but the internationally-renowned music and film festival was caught in the middle of the SB 4 fight as well. Earlier this month, two Latino Democrats in the U.S. Senate asked SXSW organizers to consider relocating the multiday event in protest of the sanctuary cities ban.

“For 31 years, @sxsw stood w/ artists & participants re: equality & tolerance. SXSW should use its platform to stand up against hate & fear,” Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, a Democrat from Nevada, tweeted June 7. She was joined by Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, who said the law could expose thousands of SXSW attendees to racial profiling by police.

Moving SXSW out of Austin, the event’s home since its inception in 1987, is not an option organizers are willing to consider, but they agreed with the senators’ criticism of the law.

“We agree with the senators that the law stands diametrically opposed to the spirit of SXSW and respect their call to action. We understand why, in today’s political climate, people are asking us to leave Texas,” Roland Swenson, the festival’s CEO, said in a statement. “For us, this is not a solution. Austin is our home and an integral part of who we are. We will stay here and continue to make our event inclusive while fighting for the rights of all.”