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Will justices vote tarnish or help Iowa's image?

By TOM WITOSKY • twitosky@dmreg.com • November 7, 2010

Iowans' lopsided vote to remove three justices from the Iowa Supreme Court may have planted the seeds of an image problem for the state.

That was the assessment of a range of people asked to assess whether the vote will hamper the state's pursuit of jobs or tarnish its civil rights image.

Although last week's vote has attracted attention from across the United States, Iowa has avoided a call to action from national groups the way various organizations called for economic boycotts of Arizona after that state's lawmakers approved a stringent law aimed at identifying, prosecuting and deporting illegal immigrants.

But officials who specialize in business relocation and media strategy also said companies - particularly those with younger, diverse work forces - might hesitate to consider a state that is viewed as not welcoming to a diverse work force.

"There are many shades of gray here," said John Boyd Jr., a principal at the Boyd Co., a business relocation firm in Princeton, N.J. "But in the minds of many people, Iowa became a progressive state with respect to civil liberties, attracting intellectual capital, and a dynamic work force" when the state Supreme Court declared in 2009 that a law banning same-sex marriage violated the Iowa Constitution's right to equal protection.

Steve Ridge, president of the media strategy group for Frank N. Magid & Associates, the Marion company that is a leading public relations research firm, said business and political leaders will have to respond to the vote that ousted Chief Justice Marsha Ternus and Justices David Baker and Michael Streit.

State leaders now will have to engage with business prospects and will have "to frame the state's image with a thoughtful, focused and aggressive communication strategy," Ridge said.

"A more discerning business community tends to be more sophisticated in evaluating the best place to grow a business - and perceptually, a strong work ethic is Iowa's number one asset," Ridge said.

Jerry Szatan, who owns a site location business in

Chicago, said the issue of same-sex marriage has never been raised to him by businesses looking to relocate. Most issues of relocation have to do with education, taxes, property costs and availability of workers. He said companies have raised questions about religious and cultural tolerance.

"There is a trend now particularly among certain companies that they want to make sure their employees feel welcome in a community. And, if they have a diverse staff, they will ask questions about it," Szatan said.

Boyd said many businesses are simply changing their view, just as the Varnum vs. Brien ruling by the Supreme Court changed Iowa's position toward same-sex marriages.

"Historically, businesses have opposed same-sex marriage, but smart companies, smart people don't have that reflex from what I can see," Boyd said. "Iowa is a pro-business state and Terry Branstad is pro-business as well. I see the openness of the state as a major asset."

Robert Koob, former president of the University of Northern Iowa and now provost at California Polytechnic State University, said he considered the vote a setback for Iowa's image, but not a big one "given this current heavily polarized political environment we all live in."

"I wouldn't overblow its importance," he said, "but I do think it is a blow to Iowa and a blow to Iowa's credibility as a place where you can have civil discourse and respect the rights of individuals."



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Koob said the vast majority of college students in Iowa probably "are wondering why the old people are still fussing" about same-sex marriage.

"Students' parents might care and their grandparents do care," Koob said. "The kids don't think it is an issue anymore."

Michael Blouin, former head of Iowa's Department of Economic Development and now president of the Greater Dubuque Development Corp., predicted negative fallout. The Democrat is a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

"The only thing that will help us is that it took place in a crazy year when all sorts of things happened all over the country," he said. "Hopefully, folks will just check it off as one of the dumb things that a bunch of states did this year."

Like Boyd, Blouin said newer companies with younger employees will be the ones that will question whether to locate to Iowa.

"It will be subtle," Blouin said. "It will come up in the context with prospects saying that they don't want to look at Iowa until things calm down there. Many companies don't want to go into states that have some kind of 'anti' attitude against any segment of the population."

Blouin said most business are no longer concerned about the sexual orientation of their employees.

"The business community has been way ahead of the public on this," he said. "They want to recruit the best talent they can find. That is their sole criteria anymore and has been for a lot of years."

Bob Vander Plaats, president of Iowa for Freedom, who led the effort to remove the judges, disagreed. He said the vote will show potential businesses that judges are held accountable for their actions in Iowa and cannot overstep their authority.

"We sent a clear message across the country that in Iowa the Legislature makes the law, the governor executes the law and the people amend the constitution," Vander Plaats said. "It is very positive sign for business and industry that we do business right."

Asked if the vote had hurt the state's image as a protector of civil rights, Vander Plaats said initially that he did not consider the state to be a "bastion of civil rights, whatsoever."

He then said the push to oust the judges was the result of the court's decision on same-sex marriage, which amounted to a "threat to everyone's freedom."

"When you have a court making law, you will have tyranny, oligarchy and you will not pass the torch of liberty to the next generation," he said. "We as a people always have been a leader in civil rights, whether that's the freeing of the slaves or giving women rights. I believe the courts have always affirmed where the people of Iowa were."

Ironically, Sharon Malheiro, a Des Moines lawyer and advocate for civil rights on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues, agreed with Vander Plaats that the state's image has not been damaged. But she takes that view for a different reason.

"I don't think Iowa's image was tarnished because what happened was that a bunch of national groups came in here and we witnessed a classic example of institutional bullying," Malheiro said. "The fact is Varnum is still here and our job now is to work to protect it for everyone."

She said the vote provided supporters of the decision with a wake-up call.

"I think everyone now understands how important it is for us to pay attention and understand that there are groups out there that simply don't agree and will do what they can to repeal it," she said.



Mom Dilemma #36:
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YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

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