



## Social battles again put Georgia in national spotlight

By J. Scott Trubey - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution - Friday, March 02, 2018

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When the lights went out at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in December, stranding thousands of travelers across the nation, some feared the incident and embarrassing national media coverage had exposed a vulnerability as Atlanta bid for Amazon HQ2.

Now several weeks later, the Georgia Legislature just told the airport snafu to hold its beer, we might top that.

The spat over Delta Air Lines' decision to end a discount program for NRA members and a contentious religious liberty bill pending under the Gold Dome have combined to cast another harsh glare on the Peach State.

How state leaders attempt to move on from the Delta impasse, and whether lawmakers go forward with an adoption bill that would allow taxpayer-funded agencies to turn away gay couples, could determine whether election year politics cause a permanent dent in Georgia's reputation, and give companies excuses to take Georgia off their lists, business experts say.

"Our reputation now is as the best state to do business," said Ken Bernhardt, a marketing consultant and a professor emeritus at Georgia State University. "We don't want to lose that."

Many states face contentious proposals from the left and right that attract national headlines, and they typically don't alter public perception — unless they're enacted, Bernhardt said.

Business leaders say they fear the broader message being sent that lawmakers aren't above trying to influence or retaliate against business decisions.

"Businesses should be allowed to make the decisions that are in the overall best interest of shareholders, employees and customers, without political interference on those decisions,"

Bernhardt said. “If businesses start thinking about how they run their business being influenced by politicians, that could be detrimental.”

Top Republican state leaders have downplayed the tussle with the state’s largest private employer and how it might reflect on the state’s pursuit of companies like Amazon.

Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, who’s running for governor, touted the state’s full pipeline of economic development prospects and said the debate highlighted Georgia’s diversity of opinion.

Rick Jeffares, a Republican candidate for lieutenant governor, wrote in an op-ed he sent to supporters that companies look to Georgia for its conservatism, not in spite of it.

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*Nathan Deal held a press conference to address the jet fuel tax cut issue after the Senate Rules Committee stripped the Delta tax cut from legislation.*

Gov. Nathan Deal held a press conference to address the jet fuel tax cut issue after the Senate Rules Committee stripped ... read more

“Changing who we are in order to become more politically correct to liberal, coastal values would have the eventual effect of driving businesses elsewhere,” Jeffares wrote. “Our conservative

values have led to low taxes, balanced budgets, AAA bond ratings, high quality of life and our status as a right to work state.”

Georgia has won businesses driven away from more liberal places, he said.

The national spotlight is shining as Amazon scrutinizes Atlanta and 19 other communities on its shortlist for its second headquarters project and the promise of 50,000 jobs. Apple is also lurking with plans for a major U.S. expansion.

Delta said it made the move to end a discount offer for members of the National Rifle Association in order to remain neutral in the wrenching gun debate that re-ignited after a deadly Valentine’s Day school shooting in Florida. State Republican lawmakers, offended by Delta’s action, were unmoved and stripped a jet fuel tax break for airlines from a broader tax bill.

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*Ed Bastian, CEO of Delta Air Lines, told employees in a memo that the company’s values “are not for sale,” following a move by state lawmakers to drop an airline tax break for jet fuel. The move came after Delta upset many Republican leaders by ending a discount offer for National Rifle Association members in the wake of a deadly Florida school shooting.*

Deal on Friday signed the overarching tax overhaul. He said days earlier he would do so without the jet fuel tax cut he’d championed, but he also slammed lawmakers for their antics, which have made the state the butt of jokes on late night TV.

But a new fight is looming. The adoption measure, Senate Bill 375, recently cleared that chamber. It's pitted socially conservative lawmakers against businesses and LGBT rights groups, and awaits consideration in the House.

The adoption bill, business leaders say, threatens some of the state's thriving industries, including hospitality and film.

"We have to always remember that Georgia is a conservative state. Metro Atlanta is more liberal," said Kendra King Momon, an Oglethorpe University political science professor. "We're in the Bible Belt, as progressive as we are, and I think some of the bills before the Legislature show the disconnect" between the rural and urban parts of the state.

### **'Cultural fit'**

Atlanta, riding a wave of big tech jobs announcements by NCR, Anthem and Honeywell, is viewed as a top contender on Amazon's shortlist.

A skilled workforce and talent pipeline, educational systems, business costs and transportation infrastructure tend to be among the top factors businesses weigh when choosing a headquarters site, experts say. Georgia has touted all of those in its bid for HQ2.

Amazon included "cultural fit" among its list of criteria within its request for proposals for HQ2. The company touts its perfect score from LGBTQ-rights group Human Rights Campaign, as do many national and Atlanta area corporate giants.

Backers of the adoption bill have said it's needed to encourage faith-based agencies to open in the state, and will lead to more adoptions. LGBT groups have strongly criticized that characterization.

Gay rights groups already put a target on Georgia's back for its lack of civil rights protections for the LGBT community, though the city of Atlanta does have civil rights legislation.

Some in Hollywood also have called for boycotts of the Peach State if the adoption bill is signed into law.

Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, center, talks with Sen. Ellis Black, R - Valdosta, in the Senate Chamber during Legislative on Feb. ... [read more](#)

State. Sen. William Ligon, R-Brunswick, said the measure would provide protections to faith-based groups, and it would not prevent gay couples from finding adoption services in the state.

"This does not close the door on anyone adopting a child, but opposing it could close the door on a child being adopted," Ligon said.

Ligon said he doesn't believe the state's reputation has been harmed by recent debates.

"I'm not concerned about it at all. I don't think it will," he said. "I think sometimes that narrative is blown out of proportion."



*Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, center, talks with Sen. Ellis Black, R - Valdosta, in the Senate Chamber during Legislative on Feb. 26, 2018, at the Georgia State Capitol. Cagle was successful in his vow to "kill" a tax break for airlines, including Atlanta-based Delta, after Delta upset many Republican leaders by ending a discount offer for National Rifle Association members in the wake of a deadly Florida school shooting*

John Boyd, a site selection expert and principal at the Boyd Company in New Jersey, said Fortune 500 companies scrutinize states on social issues.

Companies battle one another for talent, and corporations want to operate in markets where their employees will be welcomed. Some business leaders from more liberal areas in the north and west carry misgivings about a conservative state such as Georgia.

"To many, it's a different culture," Boyd said.

When Indiana passed a religious liberty bill, conventions pulled out, Angie's List halted a plan to add hundreds of jobs in Indianapolis, and the state was the subject of a boycott before lawmakers reversed course and inserted language in the bill to state that it could not be used to discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation.

In North Carolina, the NBA pulled its All-Star Game from Charlotte, and PayPal pumped the brakes on a project after lawmakers in Raleigh approved a controversial bathroom bill.

After Indiana's religious liberty fight, Metro Atlanta Chamber officials held meetings with their counterparts at the Indy Chamber about the Hoosier State's religious liberty battle. The warning from Indiana business leaders was frank: Don't go there.

In a bit of irony, Indianapolis, Raleigh and Atlanta are among the 20 communities vying for HQ2.

Scott Taylor, president of the Atlanta real estate development firm Carter, said the state has a well-earned reputation for being "open, inclusive and extremely competitive as a place to do business."

"Gov. Deal and his team have done an incredible job shaping this narrative and delivering strong results," Taylor said. "Anything that detracts from this brand is potentially quite harmful."