

New LGBTQ protections in Wake County could boost economic development



Wake County and the City of Raleigh are taking steps to protect the LGBT community. Getty Images / paul mansfield photography

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A new anti-discrimination policy could act as an economic development draw for the Triangle.

Opinion by site selection consultants is mixed about the potential for Wake County's new ordinance – meant to protect the LGBTQ community from discrimination – to tip the scales when it comes to companies looking to expand or relocate to the region.

Wake County commissioners unanimously passed the non-discrimination ordinance on Monday (Raleigh City Council was scheduled to take up the same ordinance during council's meeting on Tuesday). The measure's purpose is to protect people against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and natural hairstyle, including in the workplace and in public areas.

John Boyd, a site selection consultant out of Florida, said LGBT protection provisions could “tip the scales in Wake County’s favor for a select project with a site seeking company that is especially sensitive to ‘social impact.’”

He said other communities passing similar measures, including Triangle competitors such as Jacksonville and Miami-Dade County in Florida, have given economic development officials “a talking point if concerns about social impact arise during corporate prospecting or during site visits.”

But Joe Vranich, a site selection consultant with Spectrum Location Solutions, said he has never once negotiated for a company that specifically asked for an LGBT-friendly community.

“They compare locations when it comes to the quality of the public schools, how well the streets are maintained, housing affordability, the level of crime and local tax rates,” Vranich said. “If a community does not rank well in such key areas, it’s irrelevant that they may be LGBT friendly.”

North Carolina knows what the negative economic impacts can be when controversial laws target the LGBT community. The state's House Bill 2 was blamed for multiple projects rejecting the state – including PayPal (Nasdaq: PYPL) which, after the “Bathroom Bill” was passed in 2016 withdrew plans for a new operations center in Charlotte. Records show the bill even came up during negotiations with Amazon (Nasdaq: AMZN) as the Triangle competed for the HQ2 project.

HB2 was a statute signed into law by Republican Gov. Pat McCrory. It amended state law to preempt any anti-discrimination ordinances passed by local communities. The bill also prevented transgender people from using the restroom consistent with their gender identities in schools and public facilities. It was met with heavy criticism from the business community before being repealed in 2017 with the passage of House Bill 142.

Regarding Wake County's new ordinance, County Commissioners Chair Matt Calabria said, “Our vote today is based on one simple principle: No one should be discriminated against because of who they are.”