

**Society of American Archivists
Council Interim Action
August 18, 2017**

**Location of the 2019 SAA Annual Meeting
(Prepared by Executive Director Nancy Beaumont)**

BACKGROUND

After discussing with the Council options for location of the 2019 Annual Meeting, including Austin, Denver, Memphis, Nashville, and San Antonio, I signed a contract with the JW Marriott Austin on December 22, 2016.

In March, the Texas Senate passed SB6 (the “bathroom bill”), legislation that would “require people to use restrooms and other facilities that match the gender on their birth certificate.”

In late June we learned that the California legislature had passed AB 1887, a law that prohibits the state from supporting or financing discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people by prohibiting state-funded or state-supported travel to states that have passed discriminatory legislation since June 2015. Although many of us had thought that the California ban was related to the “bathroom bill,” we later learned that the California attorney general had added Texas to the list of banned states in mid-June, following passage of a Texas law that allows child welfare providers to refuse adoptions to LGBTQ individuals based on “sincerely held religious beliefs.”

Following a Council discussion at its July 24 meeting in Portland and in light of my charge to explore options for relocating the 2019 conference,¹ I negotiated with the general manager of the JW Marriott for an extension of the cancellation clause until August 18—the date by which a special session of the Texas House would adjourn and the status of the “bathroom bill” would be known. Due in large part to significant lobbying of the Texas House by many individuals and corporations (including the hospitality industry), the bill was not taken up in the House and thus failed in this session of the Texas legislature. The legislature will convene again in early 2019.

In a conversation with the JW Marriott Austin’s general manager on August 16, our cancellation deadline was extended to August 23. The penalty for cancellation of the contract by August 23 is \$140,000; the penalty doubles after that date.

¹ See [“Concerns About SAA 2019 Annual Meeting in Austin Texas.”](#)

DISCUSSION

SAA's annual conference is a critically important program that stands for many members as the Society's "brand." It is host to outstanding education programming, networking opportunities, and governance meetings. And it is a major source of non-dues revenue that supports and sustains SAA's activities in other areas. In light of its importance, we have carefully considered five options. Each is described below with pros and cons.

OPTION 1: Do not hold an annual meeting in 2019.

Pro: Some savings of direct expenses (e.g., Program Committee meeting and Conference & Logistics Consultants fees) as well as of volunteer and staff time that could be directed to another project.

Cons: No revenue to offset the \$140,000 cancellation fee or to underwrite the costs of other programs (typical net gain from an annual meeting is \$150,000 to \$200,000). At least temporary loss of momentum and "brand" and interruption of ongoing contact with exhibitors/sponsors. Loss of revenue from the onsite bookstore (typically \$20,000 to \$25,000). Other programs would have to bear operational expenses (typically \$180,000) with no revenue to offset those expenses. Because no single staff member is assigned to the Annual Meeting at even 25% effort, it is unlikely that we could eliminate a staff position.

OPTION 2: Hold a virtual-only annual meeting in 2019.

Pros: All members could participate at what would be, presumably, a lower registration fee with no travel expenses.

Cons: Very difficult to implement content development and delivery without having at least one in-person venue. Difficult to implement online-only exhibits experience. Costs would include \$140,000 cancellation fee plus video-streaming and/or other virtual conferencing technology plus significant reallocation of staff effort to conceive, develop, and execute an entirely new model.

OPTION 3: Partner with four or five regional archival organizations to provide joint live programming.

Pros: Offers an opportunity to partner with regionals in a meaningful way. Could be an interesting experiment in deconstructing the SAA Annual Meeting. Would reduce travel expenses for many attendees by providing a conference that is closer and may be in a less-expensive venue.

Cons: Complexity and cost of managing multiple venue contracts, hotel room blocks, and meeting spaces; determining conference content; and potential financial arrangements with external organizations. Challenge of "vetting" each venue for social responsibility.

OPTION 4: Cancel the Austin contract and meet at the JW Marriott Indianapolis.

Our search for an alternative site for the 2019 conference has yielded just one property that can meet our basic requirements for timing (August 6-12, 2019) and sleeping room block (with a room rate of \$199): the JW Marriott Indianapolis. Given the urgency of this decision, we have had no opportunity to negotiate the details of an agreement, such as meeting space—which could be a significant cost.

Pros: The JW Marriott Indianapolis is enthusiastic about welcoming SAA to the hotel and the city, and Visit Indy and the hotel have offered to help mitigate the cost of cancellation by funding half of the cancellation penalty, or \$70,000.

Cons: Costs would include a \$70,000 cancellation fee. We have been unable to determine whether the meeting space will meet our basic needs or will be offset by sleeping room pickup. We have not conducted a detailed review of current Indiana law to determine if there are discriminatory laws on the books, nor can we guarantee that discriminatory legislation will not come up in the 2018 and 2019 sessions of the Indiana legislature. SAA could not afford to cancel another contract.

OPTION 5: Proceed with the conference in Austin and mitigate the circumstances by planning for 1) special programming that addresses the intersection of one or more social issues with archives and that may invite participation by the broader Austin community and 2) a live-streaming and/or other virtual conferencing option for members who are not able to attend the conference in person.

Pros: Special programming could enrich the conference experience and send a message of support to LGBTQ individuals, archivists in Texas, and the Austin community. Rather than paying the \$140,000 penalty to the hotel – which would not provide any tangible benefit to SAA’s members – we could invest in technology that would enable more members to benefit from the content and interaction provided at the Annual Meeting.

Cons: It is possible that the contracted sleeping room block will not be met because of members’ lack of funding (including state funding for California state employees) or disagreement with the decision to meet in Texas. This could lead to additional expense for SAA. However, the hotel has offered to reduce the contracted attrition rate from 80% to 60%.

I recommend that the Council approve Option 5.

Since the Council’s July 24 meeting I have spoken with SAA staff members, other association executives, meeting planners, hospitality industry experts, and many SAA members and leaders, including several members of the Lesbian and Gay Archives Section—all in an attempt to gain different perspectives on the options available to SAA. I’ve presented all that have come up in those conversations.

I fully support the Council's decision to take a stand on social issues and discriminatory laws that affect our members and the work that they do. However, in the absence of a compelling benefit to SAA and its members derived from cancelling the Austin contract, I believe that we should proceed with the existing contract. The economic impact of moving the SAA Annual Meeting from Austin will be insignificant to Texas legislators and significantly damaging to SAA.

While not all SAA members would agree with this recommendation, I think that direct communication about the considerations addressed in making this decision will help to mitigate their concerns. In that communication we must:

- Address the financial implications of the decision. Expenditure of \$140,000 (or even \$70,000) for no gain to the organization and its members is not wise. As the Society of Southwest Archivists noted to its members in an August 1 message regarding the possibility of the "bathroom bill" being passed:

We also wanted to assure membership that we are taking steps to make sure that the next annual meeting, scheduled to be held in San Antonio, TX in May 2018, will be as open, inclusive, and welcoming as possible, regardless of the fate of this legislation. We know that other organizations, such as the Society of American Archivists, are investigating moving future meetings out of the state. It is not possible for SSA to cancel or move the San Antonio meeting at this point. If SSA pulled out of the contract today, it would cost the organization \$50,770.40, which is more than double SSA's entire annual budget. In light of this, SSA will honor the contract and have the meeting as scheduled. Also, with more than half of the SSA membership comprised of archivists in Texas, it is not the intent or desire of SSA to abandon that part of the membership because of the ill-conceived legislation being considered in the Texas Legislature.

- Acknowledge that these are challenging political times in which our professional and personal lives are disrupted and, in some cases, threatened. Just as SAA provided a safe space at the 2017 Annual Meeting in which to discuss the intersection of social issues with the work of archives and archivists, we will do so again in 2019. SAA has the opportunity to make a greater impact via its programming and interaction with the Austin community than it would by withdrawing from the contract.
- Acknowledge that some members cannot attend the in-person conference due to lack of funding, lack of release time, and/or other constraints. We have long wanted to provide a virtual conferencing option for those who cannot travel, but have not had the infrastructure to do so. While dedicating up to \$100,000 for this innovation in 2019 will not be easy, it will be money well spent because it will be directed to the benefit of SAA members.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the 2019 SAA Annual Meeting be held in Austin, Texas, per the existing hotel contract;

THAT the Program Committee be directed to craft special programming at the conference that addresses the intersection of one or more social issues with the role of archives and archivists and that invites participation by the broader Austin community; and

THAT the staff be directed to implement live-streaming and/or other virtual conferencing technology that would permit members who are not able to attend the conference in person to have a valuable virtual experience, with expenditure for such technology of up to \$100,000.

Support Statement: Payment of a \$140,000 or \$70,000 cancellation fee will compromise SAA's programs and services for several years, with no tangible benefit to SAA members. Inclusion of special conference programming will reinforce SAA's messages of support to the LGBTQ community within SAA, Texas, and the Austin community. Triggered by the California travel ban, SAA can realize its long-standing goal to offer virtual conferencing options to all members who are not able to travel to the Annual Meeting.

Impact on Strategic Priorities: Addresses Goal 2.2.: Deliver information and education via methods that are accessible, affordable, and keep pace with technological change, and Goal 4.2.: Create opportunities for members to participate fully in the association.

Fiscal Impact: We cannot at this time estimate the impact on conference attendance of meeting in Texas while 1) the state has adopted discriminatory legislation and 2) California has imposed a ban on state-supported travel to Texas for state employees. The allocation of \$100,000 to implement virtual conferencing technology will allow SAA to experiment with this alternative (or enhancement) to face-to-face conferences while directing the funds to an expenditure that offers long-term benefits to SAA's members.