



Veto Ga. Religious Liberty Bill

By Bernie Marcus

Gov. Nathan Deal has expressed misgivings over the religious freedom bill recently passed by the Georgia Legislature, saying that he would reject any legislation that “allows discrimination in our state to protect people of faith. This bill would allow organizations to discriminate based on sexual orientation and other lifestyle choices, and it threatens the Georgian economy. He should veto it.

While we all agree that a strict separation of Church and State must exist to protect religious practitioners, expanding these protections so that private businesses can discriminate threatens the robust economic recovery in the Peach State. A study paid for by the Metro Atlanta Chamber has found that adoption of such legislation could cause boycotts of Georgia companies, relocation of conventions and sporting events, and increase the difficulty of recruiting talent to the state.

I love this state and have invested heavily in its success. One of my proudest achievements was the building of the Georgia Aquarium — a world class, educational facility. It would be a shame that people wouldn't come to Georgia to see this, and other attractions based on this misguided bill.

But perhaps the biggest economic consequence of the bill is that it

would cause major Georgia companies to limit or reduce their investment in the state. This would reduce economic growth, good jobs, and tax revenue in the state. The Home Depot, of which I am the co-founder, has expressed its strong opposition to the bill.

The technology company Salesforce, which has a major employment hub in Atlanta, wrote a letter to the state legislature stating that such legislation “creates an environment of discrimination that is inconsistent with our values Without an open business environment that welcomes all residents and visitors, Salesforce will be unable to continue building on its tradition of innovation in Georgia.”

Other major Georgia businesses like AT&T, Coca-Cola, SunTrust Banks, Delta Air Lines and UPS oppose such legislation.

Georgia can look to Indiana, which passed its own religious freedom bill last year, to see the economic consequences to the state if this bill is passed. The backlash from the business community was immediate. Nine CEOs of major companies called on the law to be reformed to prevent discrimination. Several other businesses planned boycotts of the state. The state lost significant tourism and conference revenue, and its reputation for Hoosier hospitality

was called into question.

To show just how far the law could be taken, an Indianapolis resident created the “First Church of Cannabis” and argued that it was a violation of his religious freedom for the state to prosecute drug laws against him. Though this tale is far-fetched, it shows the potential negative impact of shielding religious institutions from obeying the law.

Rather than waging a losing, divisive, and distracting battle on these social issues, Georgia legislators should focus on protecting the opportunity economy that is under threat right now from the federal government. Proposed labor laws, for instance, that seek to nearly double the federal minimum wage, double the threshold under which employees are required to receive overtime pay, and impose ambush union elections pose a much greater threat to Georgia's well-being than rules against discrimination.

That's not to say social issues aren't important. As soon as the government begins to get between the Church and me, I'll be the first to speak out. But protecting discrimination is not that threat. This bill should be killed so we can focus on the big issues again.

Bernie Marcus is the co-founder of The Home Depot.