

# Poll: Damage from RFRA lingers, but severity unclear



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(Photo: Matt Detrich/The Star)

National convention planners and some tourists have lingering negative views of Indianapolis that could be tied to last year's contentious Religious Freedom Restoration Act fight, a recent poll commissioned by the city's tourism arm found.

Perhaps more troubling for tourism officials: a separate study by a national travel research group ranked Indianapolis second among 40 major convention cities for receiving "bad publicity" that may deter event planners from choosing it for future events.

But while the surveys confirm some of the fears that Indy's tourism and business leaders voiced a year ago when several major conventions threatened to pull out, a more complicated picture of the city's tourism industry is expected to be unveiled next week at Visit Indy's annual meeting. And it may undercut the business argument for extending civil rights protections to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals.

"There are people who are convinced that there was no impact (from RFRA), and there are people who are convinced that the sky fell and that we lost it all, and the truth is neither one of those," said Leonard Hoops, president and CEO of Visit Indy. "We continue to have convention business, we continue to get convention business, but there was absolutely an impact."

The Visit Indy poll, conducted by Reach Market Planning & Walker Research, conducted separate surveys of national meeting decision makers and Chicago residents, who make up Indy's top market of leisure travelers.

Among the findings: only 45 percent of meeting decision makers and 43 percent of Chicago residents agreed that "Indy welcomes all," a phrase that last year became a slogan of tourism officials hoping to reverse perceptions that Indianapolis was unwelcoming to LGBT individuals. Asked if "Indiana welcomes all," the numbers who agreed dropped to 28 percent and 38 percent, respectively, suggesting that perceptions of the state are worse overall than for Indianapolis.

Among meeting planners that didn't book Indy, 23 percent said their "perception of the city" was the reason.

The poll relied on an online sample with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The poll didn't ask about RFRA directly, so as not to skew responses in one direction, said Chris Gahl, Visit Indy's vice president of marketing. But when asked in October 2015 if Indianapolis had been in the news recently, 58 percent of convention officials mentioned something related to RFRA or LGBT rights.

In other years, Hoops said a majority of respondents would typically mention a major sporting event in Indianapolis, such as the Final Four, Super Bowl or Indy 500. In 2015, just 4 percent mentioned the Final Four.

"That stings," Gahl said. "That tells us that the wounds are still somewhat fresh from last spring. ... We thought that seven months later, the RFRA crisis would have died down and certainly would not have been able to be recalled to the degree of 58 percent."

A separate survey by Smith Travel Research found that Indianapolis was second only to St. Louis among 40 convention cities for bad publicity that might deter meeting planners from picking a city. St. Louis and its suburb, Ferguson, were roiled by racial turmoil last year following the police shooting of Michael Brown.

Still, it's difficult to tell to what extent these perceptions affected behavior. The Visit Indy poll didn't ask tourists whether they'd be less likely to visit in the wake of the controversy.

Micah Clark, executive director of the American Family Association of Indiana, which supported RFRA, suggested he didn't put much stock in the results.

"Polls are increasingly unreliable, especially a poll about something as fuzzy as 'perception,'" Clark wrote in an email to IndyStar. "There is no doubt that the hysteria and misinformation over RFRA may have given people not from here the wrong impression, and that was unfortunate and irresponsible on the part of many in the media and many with an agenda."

"What people should look at are actual hard numbers like the \$4.7 billion in new business investment in Indiana in 2015," Clark added, citing data from the Indiana Economic Development Corp.

Many of those surveyed had no opinion at all of Indy, reflecting past perception data showing Indy as "vanilla," Hoops said. About 70 percent of Chicago residents who hadn't visited Indy said the city either had no image or that it was boring. Among those who had visited Indy, most described it as fun but didn't recall specifics.

"With the exception of RFRA, there are no significant negative perceptions of Indy; rather there is a void," the poll summary says.

Further muddying the waters, early indications from industry officials are that tourism was strong in 2015, with Visit Indy surpassing its goal of 775,000 hotel night bookings. But those who have seen data that's expected to be released next week say there are also troubling signs that RFRA's true impact will be felt in years to come, because of a delay in when conventions are booked.

"Jan. 1, 2016, we have less in the pipeline today than we did in '15, '14, and '13," Hoops said. "It's better than '12, but it's worse than the last 3 years."

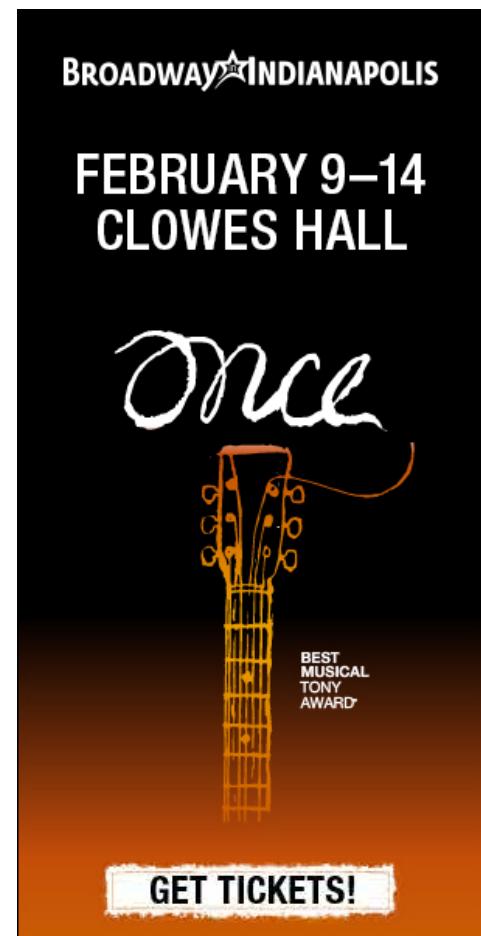
Hoops suspects his staff is competing for fewer conventions than in prior years because event planners may have crossed Indy off the list over RFRA concerns. But, he acknowledges, that's difficult to prove.

"Nobody really knows, because you don't really know what you don't get," Hoops said.

As the debate over civil rights and religious freedom ramp up at the Statehouse, that could leave both sides of the issue with talking points.

Call *IndyStar* reporter Brian Eason at (317) 444-6129. Follow him on Twitter: @brianeason.

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