

Team Effort May Not Materialize for Boycott

SPORT: Convadium Backers' Game Plan Is to Rally Fans

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Originally published May 25, 2016 at 3:12 p.m., updated May 25, 2016 at 3:12 p.m.

San Diego — Organizers of a boycott targeting three San Diego hotel companies acknowledge they face an uphill task turning football fan sentiment into tangible business and political clout in upcoming ballot campaigns focused on the potential development of a hybrid \$1.8 billion stadium and convention facility that would be financed largely through hotel tax increases.



John Riggs

Pro-stadium advocate Jason Riggs, among leaders of a recently announced boycott alleging hoteliers are collectively using their political clout to block development of a new downtown facility proposed by the San Diego Chargers, said the effort is picking up email and social media support from fans nationwide who say they won't patronize the targeted hotels.

The Chargers are not part of the boycott against San Diego-based Atlas Hotels, Bartell Hotels and Evans Hotels. And at press time, no other local company or regional business organization had officially joined the boycott effort.

Riggs said boycott organizers are seeking to push back against what critics have deemed a "hotelier cabal" that has donated to local government officials on both sides of the political aisle for at least the past decade, with significant impact on civic policy and spending priorities.

"All we are really looking for is some kind of transparency in this process," said Riggs, founder and chairman of San Diego Stadium Coalition, which recently teamed with Save Our Bolts and other civic and fan groups to announce the boycott. "Maybe if there's financial impact, it will cause the hotels and other people to take notice."

The Politics

Leaders of the targeted local hotel firms — Atlas' C. Terry Brown, Bartell's Richard Bartell and Evans' William Evans — have all been active in primarily Republican political circles for several years, and all have held leadership posts in hospitality-oriented organizations, including the executive board of the San Diego Tourism Marketing District.

The marketing district collects a 2 percent tax from city hotels that goes specifically toward local tourism promotion and funds the bulk of the San Diego Tourism Authority's budget. The tax is targeted for elimination in two separate ballot proposals — by the Chargers and a citizens' group led by attorney Cory Briggs and former councilmember Donna Frye.

None of the targeted hotel companies had responded to the current boycott at press time. An Evans Hotels spokeswoman said the company “chooses not to comment on this issue,” and the other two companies did not respond to requests for comment.

The San Diego Stadium Coalition, was founded in 2008 and generally advocates for construction of a stadium that could house the Chargers and potentially the San Diego State University Aztecs, college bowl games and other events. Riggs said the group has met over the years with city officials to discuss their general concerns about making a new stadium a priority.

Critics have maintained that a small group of locally based hoteliers — essentially the three firms named in the boycott — have used their political influence to sway elected officials in a way that has promoted the hotels’ interests at the expense of other civic efforts, such as expanding the convention center bookings, planning a large-scale celebration of Balboa Park’s Centennial, and bringing the America’s Cup yacht race to San Diego.

Local tourism and hospitality leaders, who are not in the boycotted group, have recently warned against the hotel tax hikes on grounds that they could potentially damage the San Diego region’s competitive status against rival destinations.

Visiting Team Support

In addition to local support from a combined 42,000 group members involved in the boycott, Riggs said the boycott effort has gained backing from local open-government proponents, along with NFL supporters around the country.

He said that includes fans of the Miami Dolphins, Cleveland Browns, Arizona Cardinals, Buffalo Bills and St. Louis Rams, the latter team currently in the process of moving to Los Angeles. Those fans are located not only in their home-market cities, he said, but also in numerous San Diego-based fan groups supporting those rival teams.

Riggs said fans located in several outside markets have lent their support — primarily through emails and social media — to avoiding the 12 hotels targeted in the boycott when coming to San Diego for Chargers games or future vacations or events.

For instance, Riggs relayed an email from a Northern California fan group supporting the Dolphins, saying the group plans to avoid the boycotted hotels when it brings about 300 people to San Diego for the weekend this November when the Chargers are scheduled to host the Dolphins at Qualcomm Stadium.

Mark Angelo, who runs Nor Cal Dol Fans in the San Francisco area, said in the email that the group in past visits to San Diego has spent around \$200 per person, per night.

Another group in El Paso, Texas, with more than 140 Chargers fans in the Texas-Mexico border region, said it would keep the boycott in mind when making its upcoming large group reservations at San Diego area hotels this coming season.

In practical terms, it’s too early to tell what overall business impact those avid NFL fans cited by boycott organizers might have. The Chargers’ 2016 schedule shows the team slated to host the Cardinals for an Aug. 19 preseason game; to host the Dolphins for a regular-season game on Nov. 13; and to travel to Cleveland for a Dec. 24 game against the Browns.

Miro Copic, a professor of marketing at SDSU, is among those echoing the sentiment that boycotters will be hard-pressed to impact the trajectory of the stadium issue, though the task is not impossible.



Miro Copic

The biggest upfront challenge is that much of the voting public is already against the idea of putting tax dollars toward any professional sports facility, especially after the contentious last two years between the Chargers and city officials — and with the Chargers now with one foot out the door for a potential move to Los Angeles.

There is also the larger issue of voter rebellion against almost any type of large tax increase in the current economy. In addition, local hoteliers — at least not yet — don't have the public relations and business drop-off problems that forced the Florida parent company of SeaWorld San Diego to make significant, but much-too-belated changes to whale-related programs amid fallout from animal-rights protests.

“The hoteliers so far haven't done anything to make someone think they're doing something evil,” Copic said. “They're basically just questioning this new hotel tax.”

Copic said boycotters might require time, perhaps several months, to eventually get the general public and business community on their side. The effort remains far from creating the impact generated, for instance, by international business pressures that forced South Africa to abandon apartheid; or Nike to overhaul its overseas workplace practices and wage standards.

Hotel boycotts, Copic said, traditionally have had mixed impact, and have primarily been focused on labor issues. The one recent non-labor dispute in San Diego — with actual results never officially determined — occurred in 2008, when gay-rights activists urged a boycott of two hotels owned at that time by local developer Douglas Manchester.

Manchester was among local business leaders who donated significantly to what became California Proposition 8, which would have banned same-sex marriage in the state. (Prop. 8 was passed by voters but later ruled unconstitutional. Manchester has since sold off his majority stake in both hotels, the Manchester Grand Hyatt and Grand Del Mar.)

Copic said a similar backlash, which occurred more recently, prompted the Atlanta-based restaurant chain Chick-fil-A to discontinue its official financial support of organizations calling for bans on same-sex marriage.

Riggs said boycotters suspect that the three targeted hotel companies will be using the political donation process to impact the future course of the elections process regarding the stadium. He said the boycott effort likely won't begin to see a public response until after local government elections, including the San Diego mayor's race, are decided.

Mayor Kevin Faulconer — who is opposed in the June mayoral primary — and other city officials have not yet formally endorsed or opposed the Chargers' ballot measure, for which signatures are currently being gathered. However, city officials have asked the Chargers and their representatives for clarification of financing and other issues, which the team has provided.