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After exhaustive research on alternative International Conference venue locations and evaluation of the short- and long-term impacts of canceling the contract, the ATS Board of Directors voted on Dec. 15 to honor the existing 2032 and 2034 contracts in Orlando.

The ATS Board leadership reiterated its commitment to the physical and psychological safety of members who fear traveling to International Conferences in states with morally abhorrent state laws and regulations that affect BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and persons who are or may become pregnant.

The International Conference Venues Task Force completed its work, delivering to the Board a recommendation to try to move the existing event from Orlando in 2032 and 2034. While the Task Force had previously agreed to keep the 2026 event in Orlando, many advocated moving future conferences from that location.

The Task Force, the Board of Directors, and ATS staff considered numerous factors such as conference dates, meeting format, venue availability, financial viability, the impact on respiratory health and science, and the need to support local advocacy.

Some factors included:

1. Positive experience of other medical societies during recent meetings held in similar states.
2. Impact of attendance by hosting in San Diego (the only potentially available option) for many years in a row.
3. Loss of revenue requiring a need to cut back or eliminate programs that are the backbone of ATS's mission (early career programs, MECOR, journals, assemblies, committees, working groups, grants and scholarships, mentoring programs, advocacy, etc.).

“The task force asked the ATS staff to try and move the conference venue out of Orlando,” said M. Patricia Rivera, MD, ATSF, president of the ATS. “Staff tried every possible option and angle to move the conference location without negatively impacting the Society as a whole.

The risks far outweighed the benefits of making such a move.”

“Some members wanted ATS to cancel the Orlando contract at all costs, even if the multi-million-dollar loss of revenue meant cutting back important programs that advance the profession and science of respiratory care,” said Jesse Roman, MD, ATSF. “As the ATS Treasurer, I accept my fiduciary responsibility to ensure the continuation of the organization’s mission. I deeply appreciate the input from the Task Force, and I also appreciate that ATS staff will enhance safety, advocacy, and virtual options for those afraid or unable to travel to Florida.”

Canceling the Orlando contract means the ATS could only host International Conferences for five of seven years in San Diego (the only city meeting our criteria that had the potential to host during non-traditional dates), potentially diminishing participation. Since the Task Force began, many large organizations and medical societies have held conferences in Orlando and New Orleans without experiencing reduced attendance or safety challenges.

Raed Dweik, MD, ATSF board secretary, added, “Upon being elected to ATS leadership, I originally thought, ‘let’s just move the conference--that’s the simple solution.’ But the more I got to learn about the organization and what it takes to execute the conference, what the conference means for the Society, and everything that we do, it became clear to me that this was a complex issue with dire consequences, the only viable option is to honor our contract.”

CEO Karen Collishaw, MPP, CAE, believed making the decision to cancel future contracts would significantly impact future members, leaders, and staff into the next decade. She added, “We are grateful to the Task Force for their guidance on improving advocacy, safety, and virtual conference options.” She added, “Staff have already begun implementing several of the task force suggestions for ATS 2024, ahead of plans for ATS 2026 in Orlando.” These new initiatives are based on suggestions from the Task Force and members of the Board of Directors:

The Washington, D.C. office will soon have a government relations staffer focusing on state and local policy issues, especially where ATS conference venues are located.

Community-based organizations have been identified for San Diego, Orlando, and New Orleans to consider future collaboration on policy.

Safety plans for each conference venue are already robust and developed with the help of a professional security company. ATS staff is planning a new emphasis on psychological safety, including:

- Buddy system for conference participants.
- Gender neutral bathrooms.
- A dedicated Ombudsperson to contact for assistance if any safety issue arises.

- Safety information will be communicated broadly and posted on the conference website and app.

ATS 2024 will also include more virtual options than in previous years, and planning is underway to continue to build on those virtual opportunities by the time we meet in Orlando.

The Board of Directors acknowledged this was a distressing decision for many ATS members and invited the community to work together to make the best of a difficult situation.

Please share any local advocacy or safety suggestions for International Conference venues by emailing atscommunity@thoracic.org.

Respectfully,

M. Patricia Rivera, MD, ATSF, President
Irina Petrache, MD, ATSF, President-Elect
Raed Dweik, MD, MBA, ATSF, Secretary
Jesse Roman, MD, ATSF, Treasurer
Gregory Downey, MD, ATSF, Immediate Past President
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