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Compilation of official American Thoracic Society statements
regarding international conference site selection as it relates to
abortion-restricting legislation

Considerations and Challenges in the Selection of Conference Venues

<https://news.thoracic.org/community/presidents-message/2022-november-conference-venues.php>

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The U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, which had guaranteed a constitutional right to an abortion for nearly 50 years, set off a firestorm of reactions across the country and around the world. In response, the ATS issued a strongly worded statement calling on Congress to immediately enact legislation protecting women's right to choose and urging ATS members to call on their state legislators to pass bills to strengthen access to the full spectrum of reproductive health services.



Gregory Downey, MD, ATSF
ATS President

In the aftermath of the Court's decision, the ATS Executive Committee (EC) engaged in dialogue with members from across the globe and with the Board of Directors. Of particular concern was the selection of cities and states hosting future ATS in-person meetings, especially International Conferences. Many members, including those who signed petitions and called for action using social media platforms, expressed concern about holding our conference in states with restrictive health laws. Among the issues raised were the safety of women of childbearing age who attend the conference and might have a pregnancy-related emergency and be denied life-saving therapies that could affect the fetus and the loss of educational opportunities for pregnant women who would avoid attending the international conference because of this risk. This initiated an internal review of cities under consideration for hosting our meeting, including those where ATS is already contractually obligated to hold the International Conference.

It is helpful to provide a brief background of how ATS selects its host cities. Due to our large membership size, international composition, and fiscal responsibility, the ATS Staff initiates the conference planning process a minimum of five years (sometimes even more than 10 years) before a scheduled event. When working to identify a suitable location, a number of criteria are considered, including:

- **Availability:** The International Conference is always held during the third week of May, a popular month for conferences, graduations, and other large events. At least until now, we have stayed within this week (the lone exception being in 2020 when, in response to COVID-19, we postponed the conference to August and held a virtual event).
- **Space:** Our conference requires 2.5 million square feet of space, including 50 concurrent + adjacent rooms. This is the equivalent of 43 football fields. There are very few suitable venues in the country that have this amount of space available.
- **Hotel availability:** 30+ hotels with 30,000 sleeping room nights with 80 percent walkability to the convention center plus full space in one or two headquarter hotels at which related meetings and events (assembly member meetings, Research Program Benefit, etc.) can be held.
- **Travel:** The city must have excellent airport access for domestic and international attendees.
- **Financial considerations:** venue rental, advertisement incentives, rebates, and labor costs all factor into the decision-making process.

In summary, given the size and complexity of our conference, there is a limited number of cities that have the capacity to host the International Conference. These include:

<u>Year</u>	<u>City</u>	<u>Status</u>
2023	Washington, DC	Confirmed
2024	San Diego, CA	Confirmed
2025	San Francisco, CA	Confirmed
2026	Orlando, FL	Confirmed
2027	Pending	Pending
2028	San Francisco, CA	Confirmed
2029	Washington, DC	Pending
2030, 2033, 2036	San Diego, CA	Confirmed
2031, 2035	Pending	Pending
2032, 2034	Orlando, FL	Confirmed

When considering whether to pivot from one city to another, it is important to remember that our contracts, which lock in concrete economic incentives that deliver bottom-line benefits, also include substantial penalty clauses for cancellations.

In addition, ATS would suffer considerable damage to its outstanding reputation in the meetings industry. This reputation enables it to secure contracts on favorable terms. While 2026 may feel far off, it is right around the corner in the meetings industry. Breaking our contract with Orlando, for example, given Florida's restrictive reproductive health policies, could have significant financial and reputational consequences for ATS as other cities may be less inclined to offer us generous terms.

Other issues to consider include support of our members throughout the country independent of the state in which they reside (e.g., members in Florida and Texas voiced that they would feel abandoned by the ATS if we exclude their state from hosting future conferences) and the fact that the political landscape, policies, and legislation may change by the time a meeting will take place, for example 10 years from now.

Given the complexity of the issues and the diversity of the opinions involved, the Executive Committee felt this was an issue that should be discussed by a broad array of leadership. Therefore, it was one of the primary topics of discussion at the recent Leadership Summit and Board of Directors meeting (Sept. 29 – Oct. 1). Attendees heard from Emily Catanzaro, senior director of Meeting Services, and Charles Hardin, MD, PhD, who represented the petitioners and reviewed their position. In addition, Matthew F. Griffith, MD, MPH, represented the Ethics and Conflict of Interest Committee and presented a draft of an "Ethical Framework for Strategic Positioning of Conferences" proposal. Gary Ewart, chief of advocacy for the ATS, provided some ideas for influencing states where discriminatory laws have been passed. A passionate yet respectful and thoughtful discussion followed.

Overall, the input of ATS leadership regarding selecting host cities for our conference raised several challenging questions: Will the public health policies in effect when a city is selected be the same as when the meeting takes place 5-10 years later? If those policies change, can we afford to pivot from one city to another? How can we leverage our presence in a given city to advocate for public health laws we deem important? How do we balance our need to hold a fiscally-responsible conference (which is the most impactful revenue generator for our society) with our commitment to our principles?

The EC is committed to address these questions in collaboration with other ATS leaders in the coming months. With our members' safety and educational opportunities at the forefront of our deliberations, we will take several concrete next steps:

- The EC and Board will refine and adopt an ethical framework with input from the ECOI Committee.
- We will finalize plans for the future meeting sites at our December meetings.
- We will identify advocacy activities that engage the communities hosting our conference to promote reproductive and other health rights.
- We will provide guidance to our capable and thoughtful staff to make decisions in line with our members' values.
- Together, we will find solutions that best meet our numerous, sometimes conflicting, priorities.

Selecting a Conference Venue: Balancing Competing Priorities to Maximize the ATS's Impact

<https://news.thoracic.org/community/presidents-message/presidents-message-march-site-selection.php>

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For more than a century, the annual ATS International Conference has been at the heart of our Society. The conference is a revered place where basic scientists, clinicians, educators, and related health care professionals, at all career levels from throughout the world, come together to learn, network, and, most importantly, advance respiratory care.

Traditionally, selecting a venue for the conference was all about logistics. What city had the requisite number of hotel rooms, a large enough convention center, adequate airport, date availability, etc. Last November, through my President's Message I shared the various factors that must be accounted for when selecting a venue. There is no need to repeat them here. Safe to say, finding a suitable location is a complex undertaking given the number of prerequisites that must be met and the limited number of cities that satisfy our needs.

Over the past year there has been increasing interest among the membership in our site selection process. This was especially true following the US Supreme Court's Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health Organization decision, which overturned Roe vs Wade and the subsequent legislative actions by many states to significantly limit access to women's reproductive health services. Many ATS members would like to see the Society boycott any future conferences in states that adopt such restrictive policies.

Much like the abortion issue itself, some peoples' views about our venue choice are set in stone; many will find the site selection criteria we use prudent and responsible, others will find it bereft of moral compass. Whatever your view, we ask that you keep the following points in mind:

The Executive Committee solicited and received significant input on this issue from others in ATS leadership, including the Board of Directors and the Ethics and Conflict of Interest (ECOI) Committee. The ECOI Committee prepared an "Ethical Framework for Strategic Positioning of Conferences" document that will be used in the site selection process moving forward. Additionally, the site selection criteria were a major topic of discussion during last fall's Leadership Summit and Board of Directors meeting.

When our conference is in states that have adopted restrictive women's health laws, ATS will work closely with the local medical community and public officials to ensure that all attendees have immediate access to the care they need. We have already engaged in such conversations with officials in New Orleans and Orlando and will put in place protocols and procedures that will help ensure that access remains unfettered. The safety and security of our attendees, exhibitors, vendors, and staff has been and will remain a top priority for everyone involved in conference planning.

We are strongly supportive of urging our members to respond openly and vocally with their views on abortion restrictions and the right to reproductive health. Indeed, we feel strongly that we as a professional society cannot be silent on this issue. We also are concerned that taking the conferences away from those cities would have adverse effects on those already most affected by the restrictive abortion policies. We believe that we have a better opportunity to influence the public debate on controversial public health issues by being a part of the community, not boycotting it. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of residents of a city that is a potential site for our International Conference city may not be in agreement with restrictive legislation that was decided by the state legislature. Additionally, we plan to organize significant local advocacy activities when visiting those states with restrictive laws in place. This helps give a voice to our members in those states as well as others who may feel powerless to voice their concerns.

Finally, the old adage "no margin, no mission" is as true at ATS as any other not-for profit organization, including academic medical centers. The cold reality is that our annual conference is a major source of revenue for the Society, without which we would be unable to support numerous programs that are vital to our mission.

Please know that leadership and staff involved in planning the International Conference will take all steps necessary to ensure everyone's health and safety while also leveraging it to help drive the ATS mission for years to come.

Gregory Downey, MD, FRCPC, ATSF, President

Considerations in Selecting Venues for the ATS International Conference: Balancing Competing Priorities of the Society's Diverse Membership (letter published in *Annals of ATS*, March 2023)

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To the Editor:

The annual ATS International Conference has been at the heart of our Society for more than 100 years. It is a critical meeting allowing a diverse international group of basic scientists, clinicians, educators, related healthcare professionals, and patient advocacy groups to come together to learn, network, and, most importantly, advance respiratory health. Historically, the selection of a venue for the conference has prioritized logistics that included keeping the same timing of the meeting in May, hotel and convention center capacity, national and international accessibility, and cost. This is a complex undertaking given the number of prerequisites that must be met and the limited number of cities that satisfy our needs.

Over the past several years, there has been increasing interest among the membership in the venue selection process. This was especially evident following the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned *Roe vs Wade* and the subsequent legislative actions by many states to significantly limit access to reproductive health services. In addition to our public opposition to such legislation, many ATS members would like to see the Society boycott future conferences in states that adopt similar restrictive policies. [In this issue of the Journal \(1\), Lee and colleagues argue](#) that medical societies should reconsider holding conferences in locations that limit access to reproductive healthcare.

The Society has reviewed its selection criteria, taking into consideration members' opinions and needs within the framework of the ATS' mission. The Executive Committee solicited and received significant input on this issue from others in ATS leadership, including the Board of Directors as well as the Ethics and Conflict of Interest Committee (ECOI). The ECOI Committee prepared an "Ethical Framework for Strategic Positioning of Conferences" which was discussed during last fall's Leadership Summit and December Board of Directors meeting. The ATS leadership agreed that the "Ethical Framework for Strategic Positioning of Conferences" will be used in the site selection process.

As reiterated in the "Ethical Framework for Strategic Positioning of Conferences," our number one priority in selection of a venue is the safety and well-being of our attendees. When our conference is in states that have adopted restrictive reproductive health laws, ATS will work closely with the local medical community and public officials to ensure that all attendees have immediate access to the care they need. We have already engaged in such conversations with officials in New Orleans and Orlando and will put in place protocols and procedures that will help ensure that access remains unfettered. By holding our Conference in a variety of venues, we have an opportunity to influence the public debate on controversial public health issues by being part of the community, not turning our backs on those who share our values and live and work in these communities. We plan to organize meaningful advocacy activities leading up to and on-site when visiting those states with restrictive laws in place. This helps give a voice to our members in those states as well as others who may feel uncomfortable expressing their concerns locally while considering financial factors and adhering to best business practices in the meetings industry.

The ATS leadership and staff involved in planning the International Conference are committed to listening to our members' concerns and taking all steps necessary to safeguard everyone's health and safety at the International Conference, such that we can continue to provide the most anticipated, exciting, and impactful annual meeting for all individuals in attendance.

Reference

1. Lee AG, Maley J, Hibbert K, Akgün KM, Hauschildt KE, Law A, Kaminski N, Hayes M, Gesthalter Y, Bosslet GT, Santhosh L, Witkin A, Hills-Dunlap K, Çoruh B, Gershengorn HB, Hardin CC. [Medical Societies Must Choose Professional Meeting Locations Responsibly in a Post-Roe World](#). *Ann Am Thorac Soc*. 2023 Feb 22. doi: 10.1513/AnnalsATS.202211928IP. Epub ahead of print.

Official statement of ATS Executive Committee released by @atscommunity on Twitter on May 2, 2023



Transcription:

“Some of our colleagues and friends have voiced their concerns with the ATS International Conference (IC) being held in certain states based on their laws governing reproductive and other rights. Of course, we all care about these issues deeply. However, these arguments and concerns deserve not only attention but also context, as they often fail to acknowledge the many thoughtful conversations that have previously occurred surrounding the contradicting wishes of a diverse membership with the overall health of an organization; the distance these well-intended communications create between peers who agree on the root of this problem; and the feelings of abandonment of those living in states affected by jurisdictions that affect their rights.

“We acknowledge the challenges of our members and conference attendees who reside in states that restrict complete access to all health care services: we see you.

“We plan to capitalize on our presence in your state as an opportunity to support you and advocate for your rights. The ATS is committed to enhancing our national and local advocacy efforts through social justice offsets, rallies, events to locate local constituents, and more.

“Our priority is exploring ways to enhance access to the International Conference for members who choose not to attend. Therefore, a major focus of our new Learning Council is to develop robust, cost-effective alternatives to in-person attendance at the IC.

“We value the dialogue on this important issue and appreciate your passion for the ATS and its members.”