

Is Expanding the Convention Center the best use of HOT revenue? You should have a say.

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More than a year ago AIBA became involved with the Tourism Task Force in working to reallocate some of the Hotel Occupancy Tax (HOT) to promoting local business to tourists. After all, we are a huge attraction to tourists. Tourists don't come here to experience what they have at home. They come here to experience the flavor of our local culture. And local business is one of the greatest expressions of that local flavor. Unfortunately, we weren't successful.

I didn't start out being against expansion of the Convention Center. I really didn't know enough to be for or against it. But what I learned sitting in hours and hours of meetings and presentations enlightened me and left me with an opinion—a very strong opinion.

When I learned that the Convention Center produces only 4% of Austin's tourists but garners more than 70% of all public tourism finding, I was left scratching my head. When I learned that SXSW alone represents 30% of the 4%, I started to ask questions. When I learned that Visit Austin wants to expand the Convention Center to the (now estimated) \$1.2 Billion, I started calculating return on investment. It didn't take long for me to realize this makes no sense. The convention industry is flat. Even if the Convention Center saw a 50% increase in business (extremely unlikely, when did you last see a 50% increase in business?), that's only a 2% increase in visitors. Cultural tourism (that's us local businesses) is what's growing.

All this led me to ask "If Austin has \$1.2 Billion to invest in attracting tourists, how could that money be better spent?" If 96% of our visitors come for reasons other than an event at the Convention Center, what could we do to attract more? What could we do that could also benefit Austinites too? More arts venues? Taking care of our parks? Supporting the music community that we all love 365? Bring more tourists into local businesses so that money could circulate all over Austin? Enhance something in every part of town instead of just downtown? The possibilities are almost endless. And this is where I landed. Squarely against expansion of the Convention Center. It doesn't make sense on any level.

But this isn't my decision. Right now, it's not yours either. The HOT revenue is a community asset that should be treated as such. AIBA has members who would like to see the Convention Center

expanded. They believe this could be good for their business. I can respect that. But as a community asset, I believe it should be up to us, all of us, how it is allocated. While I may be against expansion, out of respect for all our members AIBA is not taking a position on expansion. My role here is educational advocacy—informing you of the facts so you can make your own decisions.

However we are partnering with SOS Alliance and others to give you the vote. We're doing this through a petition to have a ballot measure added to call for public votes when spending billions of your dollars. In the coming weeks you'll be hearing more from us about the petition. To be clear, the petition isn't to stop expansion of the Convention Center but to let the public decide. I hope you can all get behind this choice.

For now, read more information on this at www.unconventionalaustin.org. It's still under construction but all the basics are there. You can [download the petition here](#).

If you are so moved to get involved, we have many options.

(a) Either have clipboard on counter and ask people to sign themselves, or allow petitioners outside your door.

(b) Have a small front and back handout on the counter explaining why it is important to support the hotel tax citizen petition ordinance.

(c) Be listed publicly as a supporter

(d) Host a "signing day" at your business that would target getting signatures and also have a tip jar for donations to the campaign.

(e) include a short blurb in any customer list email or newsletter about why it is important to prioritize our hotel tax tourism dollars for local art, music, business, parks, and historic preservation and to limit expenditures for the Convention Center. Not against the Convention Center, just don't want the Convention Center taking all of the money when it's not bringing visitors to town and does nothing to help 99% percent of local residents and businesses (we can help with this).

If you have any questions or just want to talk about this, please don't hesitate to contact me at rebecca@ibuyaustin.com.

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