

ICE-Friendly Tech Companies Draw Scorn from California Cities, Counties

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(TNS) — A statewide coalition is calling on Bay Area cities and counties to protect the privacy of immigrants by boycotting tech companies that provide data sharing services to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The Deport ICE coalition wants governments to adopt its Sanctuary City Contracting and Investing Ordinance, which would prohibit them from investing or contracting with companies that provide “data broker” or “extreme vetting” services to ICE unless there is no alternative.

Richmond’s city council approved the ordinance in June and Oakland and Berkeley are considering the policy this month, according to the coalition of immigrants rights groups. The coalition plans to approach San Jose officials in the coming weeks and San Francisco later this year.

The policy comes as the local immigration debate shifts toward several prominent tech companies — including Palo Alto’s Palantir Technologies, Vigilant Solutions in Livermore and Amazon, which have been criticized for contracting with federal immigration agencies. Last week, advocates descended on Salesforce’s annual

conference in San Francisco with an 14-foot-tall cage symbolizing ICE detention to protest the company's contract with Customs and Border Protection. More than 600 employees signed a letter this summer calling on CEO Marc Benioff to end the contract. Benioff has said the company does not work with ICE.

"As we get more and more cities on board it starts to add up...and hopefully we get these guys to back away from ICE," said Brian Hofer of Deport ICE, who is also chairman of the Oakland Privacy Commission. "We just want to get regional buy-in power."

ICE on Wednesday said it would continue routine operations and declined to comment further.

Data brokers collect information, such as credit history, driver's license data, phone accounts, court records and employment information, and sell it to other businesses or government agencies. The ordinance defines "extreme vetting" as "data-mining, threat modeling, predictive risk analysis, or other similar service."

Richmond's ordinance would eventually end the city's contract with Vigilant Solutions, which collects license plate data in conjunction with law enforcement and other agencies throughout the nation, according to the company's website. ICE signed a contract in December with West Publishing, which is partnering with Vigilant Solutions.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt cast the only dissenting vote on the policy, calling it a "feel-good ordinance that has no substantive effect on making the immigrant community safer." He also said it could bring unintended consequence because the police department relies on Vigilant for license plate data to combat crime, according to Butt. That will end when the city cuts ties with the company — which has said it does not share license plate data with ICE.

"It's a question of whether you want to shoot yourself in the foot to make a point," said Butt.

"Richmond has been a leader in its immigration policy," Butt continued. "We're also a city that has a high crime rate. By far the highest priority of Richmond residents is public safety. We're between a rock and a hard place. Do we diminish our commitment to public safety... or do we go with our commitment to make a statement about the immigrant community?"

Vigilant said agency-collected data, "belongs to the agency, and it is up to the agency to share with other agencies, as permissible by federal and state laws and agency policy." Spokeswoman Mary Alice Johnson didn't confirm its partnership with Richmond police and said the company doesn't comment on any of its contracts or clients.

Eunice Hernandez, an organizer with Sacred Heart Community Service in San Jose, said advocates hope to meet with council members to come to discuss the policy.

"We've been hearing from our community members that it's great that the city and county aren't working directly with ICE, but they're still concerned about our information — who has access to it and where it's going," she said.

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