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Austin Cancels SXSW Amid COVID-19 Concerns

KUT 90.5 | By [Andrew Weber](#)

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Austin Mayor Steve Adler announces that he's declared a local disaster and has issued an order effectively canceling SXSW this year.

South by Southwest is canceled.

Mayor Steve Adler, Travis County Judge Sarah Eckhardt and public health officials said the concerns surrounding COVID-19 were too great.

"I've gone ahead and [declared a local disaster](#) in the city, and associated with that, have issued an order that effectively cancels South by Southwest for this year," Adler said at a press conference Friday.

Adler's announcement comes in tandem with one from Eckhardt, who said the declaration will last a week, though it could be extended. Public health officials say there are no cases of COVID-19 in Austin or Travis County, but that the decision was made out of an abundance of caution.

"This is a decision based on expert medical opinion," Eckhardt said.

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In a statement released after the announcement, [SXSW said](#) it was "exploring options to reschedule the event," and that it was "now working through the ramifications of this unprecedented situation."

"We are devastated to share this news with you," the statement read. "'The show must go on' is in our DNA, and this is the first time in 34 years that the March event will not take place,"

In the past week alone, roughly 25 brands – including Twitter, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Warner Media – have pulled out of the festival, citing concerns over the coronavirus.

Interim Medical Director of Austin Public Health Dr. Mark Escott said the influx of people coming to Austin from areas with cases of person-to-person transmission was the main factor in the decision-making process. On top of that, he said, the number of crowded events and concerts could lead to a potential spread of the virus. He also noted there is currently no vaccine for COVID-19.

"After careful deliberation, there was no acceptable path forward that would mitigate the risk enough to protect our community," he said.

Escott urged people to avoid shaking hands, to wash their hands or use hand sanitizer frequently, and to avoid touching their faces. People who believe they may be sick should stay home.

Questions remain over the festival's unofficial events and concerts across the city, which greatly outnumber official ones. Adler said the city is in the process of identifying steps to take with respect to those events.

“The work continues ... to identify the criteria or ... the next appropriate action with respect to unsanctioned [events],” Adler said. “And by unsanctioned, I don’t mean bad or evil, we just mean events that are not formally under the South by Southwest umbrella.”

Last year, the festival brought in an estimated \$356 million and drew more than 400,000 attendees from across the globe. SXSW organizers have deferred to the city and county in its decision-making about whether to cancel the festival. This is the first time the event has been canceled in its 34 years.

The coronavirus has led to the deaths of 14 people in the U.S. and infected more than 100,000 people since late January.

This post has been updated.

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