

Protesters, fresh off Citizens Bank, shift to Boston Dynamics ICE contract

By [Stephen MacLeod](#) – Reporter, Boston Business Journal
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The protest organization behind the push last spring to get Citizens Bank to cut ties with prison companies that provide services for ICE has changed its name and now has a new target: a local robot maker.

De-ICE Citizens Bank Coalition now is called the De-ICE Action Network, and it has set its sights on Waltham-based Boston Dynamics, maker of [the Atlas humanoid robots](#) and the Spot canine-inspired robots.

The coalition is planning what it describes as a peaceful protest of 50 to 100 people Saturday at 11 a.m. at the Museum of Science to raise awareness of a contract the organization says Boston Dynamics is signing with ICE to provide the government agency with [its Spot robot](#). De-ICE emphasized that it supports the Museum of Science and is using the museum's exhibit of the Spot robot as a place to conduct its "awareness" campaign.

De-ICE [had been protesting Citizens' relationships with private prison companies CoreCivic and GEO Group](#), which facilitate ICE detentions and deportations. Citizens eventually left those deals — after two New Jersey municipalities voted to divest a collective \$329 million from Citizens Bank — but said that its departure [was not a result of the protests, but rather a business decision](#).

Coalition met with Boston Dynamics

The coalition told the Business Journal that despite the contract's relatively smaller size, only about \$2 million, it believes that the deal is a betrayal of Boston Dynamics' posted ethics policies. He said Boston Dynamics came into focus because many of the coalition's members are in and around Greater Boston.

"A company right in our backyard is turning over a very powerful device that can be used for data gathering and for any number of purposes, and we're concerned ICE doesn't always abide by the law," said Peyton Fleming, the coalition's spokesperson. "(ICE agents) trample on human rights, and we think that conflicts with the strong ethical policies this company has, which is, these (robots) are to be used for positive human use."

The coalition sent a letter to Boston Dynamics on Aug. 31 requesting a meeting to discuss the contract.

"It is apparent to us from the prominent placement of ethics on the company website that Boston Dynamics has thought deeply about the potential harm their products might cause and wants to prevent potential misuse," the coalition's letter to Boston Dynamics reads. "In this, the procurement of Spot by ICE raises special concerns. As an agency, ICE has been singularly obstructive when faced with attempts to hold them accountable whether by judges or by state and local officials. For Boston Dynamics, there is every reason to worry that ICE will use your products in ways you do not intend and will show similar obstructiveness if they are reminded what acceptable uses are."

According to Fleming, the meeting took place on Sept. 16, at which the coalition argued that Boston Dynamics should cancel its business with ICE.

"Our meeting with Boston Dynamics was informative, but it did not change our position: Boston Dynamics should not be putting this powerful technology in the hands of ICE," Fleming said.

Boston Dynamics did not immediately respond to a Business Journal request for comment.

Boston Dynamics history of ethics in robotics, AI

Boston Dynamics and its leaders have made pushing for ethical standards in the robotics industry a core part of its identity.

Marc Raibert, Boston Dynamics chairman, former CEO and founder, is the executive director of the Robotics and AI Institute (previously the Boston Dynamics AI Institute). The Institute, a separate entity from the robotics company despite the former name, researches advances in robotics, AI [and associated ethics](#).

The company has also [advocated for a bill that would prevent robots from carrying firearms](#). The bill, H5444, passed the Massachusetts House in May and was referred to the Senate Ways and Means Committee, where it currently sits. The bill does have carveouts for defense contractors and requires law enforcement agencies to receive a warrant or other judicial approval to use a robot with a weapon.

Unrelated to its contract with ICE, Boston Dynamics is planning for massive growth in Boston. The manufacturer [received a state incentive to add 1,250 jobs](#) in a \$100 million expansion of its footprint in Waltham. That expansion is expected to more than double the company's presence here [as it starts delivering its Atlas robots to customers](#).

Boston Dynamics has been [owned by the Korea-based automotive giant Hyundai Motor Group](#) since 2021.

Fleming said right now, the coalition is focused on raising awareness of the ICE contract, but that the group is also actively looking at other companies that work with ICE. He also said the coalition especially wants to target companies with strong ethical codes, because it views working with ICE as unethical.

"A lot of what we want to do is raise the profile of the companies that are working closely with ICE and are profiting from that work," Fleming said. "Many of these companies, including Boston Dynamics, are reputable companies that have really gone out of their way to adopt strong ethical principles."