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by Margie M. Palmer

NAVIGAYTOUR
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Gay-Marriage Ruling Could Boost California's Ailing Economy

The flowers have been selected, the Veterans' Memorial Center has been booked, and the three-piece band has been chosen. The e-invitations have gone out and relatives are flying in. The brides—and there will be two of them—might not have time to buy something new to wear, but that's OK.

Shelly Bailes and Ellen Pontac, who have been together for 34 years, do not want to wait a day longer than necessary to tie the knot now that California's Supreme Court has legalized gay marriage. They had five weeks to plan a June 21 reception for 250 people.

"We should have been ready, but we weren't," Pontac said with a laugh. "We are taking care of all the details we can, and no matter what happens, we know we will have good company and good music and food and drink."

The gay marriage ruling could give a big, sudden boost to California's sputtering economy, with thousands of same-sex couples from across the nation already beginning to converge on the state since the decision took effect June 16. Hotels, restaurants, florists and other wedding services are reporting a flurry of business.

"The good news for California is that in the face of probably the worst budget problems the state has ever faced, the LGBT wedding industry is going to be a financial shot in the arm," said Jeffrey Prang, mayor of West Hollywood, a popular destination for gay travelers in Southern California.

A June 2 article appearing in the Los Angeles Times reported the court's ruling comes at a good time for some small wedding-related businesses, which are finding that their traditional customers are spending less on weddings due to the economy.

Things really slowed down in February, said Michael Willms, owner of Entertainment Design Events, an event planning company that's done big bashes such as a wedding for actress Lindsay Price, who stars in the NBC show Lipstick Jungle.

But they've picked up now. PlanetOut, a media and entertainment company that conducts surveys about gay and lesbian consumers, says gay consumers earn 20 percent more than their straight counterparts, on average, and spend about 10 percent more on nuptials.

The day after the ruling, Willms booked a \$55,000 same-sex wedding.

"These weddings will be much more lavish," he said. "Everybody's been waiting for it to be legal to throw the big party."

A study issued last month by UCLA's Williams Institute for Sexual Orientation and the Law projected that gay men and lesbians will spend \$684 million on cakes, photographers and other services over the next three years unless voters reverse the high court's ruling in the fall.

The researchers found that about half of the state's more than 100,000 same-sex couples will get married during the next three years, and an additional 68,000 out-of-state couples will travel to California to exchange vows.

Out-of-State wedding and tourism spending is expected to bring in over \$4,314 per couple, or \$291.2 million over the next three years. In-state couples, however, are expected to top over \$7,645 per couple, or \$392.3 million over the next three years.

The study estimated that over that period, gay weddings will generate over \$63.8 million in revenue for state and local governments, \$9 million in marriage-license fees for counties, and some 2,200 jobs.

"San Diego and other major gay-friendly cities are rushing to promote themselves as wedding destinations to same-sex couples," said David Jefferys, president of the Altus Group and City

Navigaytour gay themed travel and wedding guide. "Businesses that want to capture same-sex wedding business need to promote themselves in gay-friendly media. Also, same-sex couples need to connect with gay-friendly businesses that want to work with them. That's why we are launching the wedding guide with the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau as part of the San Diego Navigaytour."

The guide, which will hit the streets by September 1, will include detailed information about gay-friendly venues, caterers, restaurants, photographers, florists, jewelers, limousine services and other businesses of interest.

Continues Jefferys, "note the difference in spending for in-state vs. out-of-state. In-state couples are expected to spend more because out-of-state couples may split their ceremonies between two states. In that case, the guide is important for cities trying to attract couples in-state. Those that are seen as gay friendly may have a better shot at getting business."

In addition to destinations such as San Diego, West Hollywood, Palm Springs (check out marriedinpalmsprings.com) and San Francisco saying "We do" to couples planning long-awaited weddings, the California Travel and Tourism Commission posted a special gay wedding page on its website last week listing spots in Napa County, Yosemite National Park and comparatively conservative Orange County that are offering wedding and honeymoon packages.

Brian Siewert, co-owner of the Sonoma Orchid Inn in Guerneville, a small town in Sonoma County wine country, said the region is already home to a lot of gay-owned and gay-operated businesses, including his own, which he runs with his partner.

"We've always had honeymoon getaways here in the Russian River Valley, but it's really nice that now they will be gay honeymoons this time," he said.

But he added, "We are really concerned about this whole thing that people are trying to make a buck off it, as opposed to the feeling we have that we are really trying to celebrate and have them have a great experience and build their lives together."

Rena Puebla, who makes wedding-cake figures that can be customized to come in bride-bride and groom-groom pairs, said she has gone from selling 50 a day to 150 since the May 15 ruling. "It's unbelievable," said Puebla, whose Costa Mesa company, Renellie International, sells the cake toppers online. "People are just so excited that there's something like this out there for them."

Puebla's company designs a variety of single figurines and then pairs them according to the customer's wishes. Some bride figurines come in a tailored skirt and tuxedo jacket instead of a big gown. "People can do whatever they want because it's not already stuck together," Puebla said.

But will this financial boom be enough to truly impact California's ailing economy?

On June 16, the Business and Media Institute reported that California's 2007 gross domestic product was \$1.55 trillion. "The potential 'boost'—an average of \$228 million annually—would add a little over 1/100th of 1 percent (0.0147 percent) to the California economy. That's not exactly the economic salvation the Williams Institute has been touting and which has been reported by U.S. News & World Report, USA Today, the Associated Press and others. The New York Times even called it a 'potential windfall' on June 14."

Still, CNBC Silicon Valley Bureau Chief Jim Goldman, warned the state could miss out on this economic impact if Californians decide to amend the state constitution on November 4 to reverse the court's decision and limit marriage to a union between one man and one woman.

"All of this could come to a screeching halt come November when a ballot measure seeks to reverse all this," Goldman warned. "But, in between now and then—we're talking big-time bucks—lots of money for a lot of vendors looking for a host of new ways, well, to generate some cash."

-AP Newswire. Margie M. Palmer
contributed to this story.

