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Gay marriage could boost California's ailing economy

By LISA LEFF
Associated Press



A display for gay marriage celebrations is seen on the window of Castro Village Wine Co. in San Francisco's Castro District, Tuesday, June 3, 2008.

Marcio Jose Sanchez AP

SAN FRANCISCO — 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 expected to converge on the state when the decision takes 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 study issued this week 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

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travel to California to exchange vows. The study estimated that over that period, gay weddings will generate \$64 million in tax revenue for the state, \$9 million in marriage-license fees for counties, and some 2,200 jobs.

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.

The possibility that the window for weddings could close after the November election — when a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage will appear on the ballot — has added to the rush to wed. Also, the prospect of getting hitched became even more inviting when New York state announced recently that it would recognize gay marriages performed in California and other jurisdictions.

Unlike Massachusetts, the only other state where gay couples can wed, California does not have a residency requirement for marriage licenses.

Gay-friendly destinations such as West Hollywood, Palm Springs and San Francisco are not the only places saying "We do" to couples planning long-awaited weddings. The California Travel and Tourism Commission posted a special gay wedding page on its Web site last week listing spots in Napa County, Yosemite National Park and comparatively conservative Orange County that are offering wedding and honeymoon packages.

Kathryn Hamm, president of Washington-based gayweddings.com, an online retailer and wedding planner, said the number of businesses submitting listings for her gay-friendly vendor's directory has tripled in the past three weeks.

"Vendors are absolutely looking to get their services out there," said Hamm, who has been working overtime to get invitations printed for couples planning late-summer and early-fall weddings. "Some identify as gay and lesbian and have been serving the community for a while, and some are straight and longtime supporters. But they have all said how excited they are about how about the recent development from a social justice perspective."

The timely economic infusion has been noted by Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who twice vetoed bills that would have legalized gay marriage but has supported the court's decision.

"I hope that California's economy is booming because everyone is going to come here and get married," Schwarzenegger told the California Chamber of Commerce.

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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."

Pontac said that she is having a lot of fun planning her wedding and that the rush has made certain decisions — such as what to serve — a little easier.

"It's amazing how when you have no time, it's 'Anything but Gorgonzola is fine,'" she said.

Associated Press Staff Writers Laura E. Davis in Los Angeles and Amanda Fehd in San Jose contributed to this story.

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