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Palm Springs hopes to put the sizzle in same-sex marriage

The desert city is marketing itself as the premier destination for couples newly freed by the state Supreme Court to tie the knot.
By Scott Gold
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PALM SPRINGS — Between the economy, gas prices and the heat -- it was 108 degrees Tuesday -- it was shaping up as a bleak summer in the Coachella Valley. Until, that is, the state Supreme Court found it unconstitutional to exclude same-sex couples from the right to and the rites of marriage.

Immediately, the Palm Springs area went into overdrive, selling itself -- with marked success -- as a premier destination for gay marriages, alongside San Francisco, West Hollywood, San Diego and a few other spots.

"We already have a high brand loyalty within the gay and lesbian community," said Scott Hines, senior partner at Burke, Rix, Hines & Associates, a government relations and communications firm tapped by City Hall to spearhead the effort. "Given that there was going to be a known, pent-up demand for same-sex marriage, it only made sense to carve out a niche."

Already, Riverside County clerks who issue marriage licenses are booked through the end of the week. The county has deputized Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet, City Clerk James Thompson and two City Council members to perform weddings. The mayor's office has been swamped with inquiries.

On Saturday night, the city will hold the Palm Springs Marriage Celebration, which organizers hope to make an annual event. More than 1,500 people are expected downtown on La Plaza -- including 25 same-sex couples signed up to get married.

"This is the next step to equality," said Pougnet, who is gay and the father of 26-month-old twins. "It's very important to celebrate." He plans to marry his partner, Christopher Green, this year.

Hines' firm has also helped create marriedinpalmssprings.com to connect couples interested in getting married here with photographers, florists, cake-makers and other related businesses. Hotels are already reporting unusually brisk service for the off-season.

Though most marriages conducted here so far have been between local residents, "I've gotten calls already from Nebraska, South Dakota, Florida," Hines said. "I just got off the phone with a couple from Washington, D.C., asking for advice to find a beautiful outdoor venue in Palm Springs."

Pougnet said much of the marketing effort will be aimed at New York, where Gov. David Paterson recently ordered state agencies to prepare to recognize same-sex marriages. Seattle and Portland, Ore., will also be targeted.

The mayor conducted the Coachella Valley's first same-sex wedding Tuesday morning. Philip Colavito, 43, and Dean Seymour, 44, are not typical grooms; they met on a yacht, co-own a design firm and until recently lived in a 11,000-square-foot estate once owned by Adam West, of "Batman" fame, and Elizabeth Taylor. Still, their nuptials suggest how much can be spent here if you put your mind to it.

Their civil ceremony was followed by a reception at the Parker Palm Springs, a modernist hotel built on 13 acres that include saltwater swimming pools, croquet courts and fire pits. The menu at Norma's, the restaurant there, includes a lobster frittata with Sevruga caviar. List price: \$1,000.

Total cost of the Colavito-Seymour formal reception: \$38,000, they said. The event included 200 invited guests, flower girls and hors d'oeuvres including lamb lollipops and tuna tartar. Patty Gleeson, the hotel's catering manager, said the staff typically oversees 30 to 50 weddings a year; that number will probably rise to at least 75, she said.

Colavito and Seymour put together the wedding in just 10 days after learning they would be the first same-sex couple married in the region. "Think about being a child and dreaming about the idea of marriage and family and home and support. And you have to tell yourself 'No. I'm not good enough. I will never have that,'" Colavito said. "Now we will."

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