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By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

June 02, 2008

Forget economic stimulus checks. Same-sex marriages may give California just the financial boost it needs.

Wedding planners, bakers and hotels began booking more business almost immediately after the state Supreme Court's May 15 decision overturning a ban on gay marriage. Citing pent-up demand, one UCLA study projects that same-sex unions could provide a \$370-million shot in the arm to the state economy over the next three years.

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"Being in West Hollywood, we've been inundated," said Tom Rosa, owner of the Cake and Art bakery on Santa Monica Boulevard. "After the ruling, the phone really picked up."

Rosa said couples who had waited for decades to legally marry were splurging on 5-foot tall confections shaped like carousels and cakes featuring handcrafted birds of paradise.

Mike Standifer and Marc Hammer were already planning a commitment ceremony for October, but when the court ruling came out, they decided to throw an even bigger bash and get married.

They plan on spending about \$25,000, which includes renovations on their Hollywood home so they can have the party in their backyard. The new price tag includes rings, their suits and those of their wedding party, and the cost of flying in Standifer's priest from Tennessee -- all things they wouldn't have done if they were just having a party.

"The wedding dynamic in the last two weeks changed everything," Standifer said. The wedding businesses he's worked with so far seem thrilled. "I think it's because the economy's not so great, but the vendors have been treating us like royalty," he said.

By some estimates, weddings and commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples generate \$1 billion a year in revenue.

PlanetOut, a media and entertainment company that conducts surveys about gay and lesbian consumers, says gay consumers earn 20% more than their straight counterparts, on average, and spend about 10% more on nuptials.

The court ruling comes at a good time for many small wedding-related businesses, which are finding that their traditional customers are spending less on weddings because of the economy.

"Brides are being more frugal with things they don't see as a priority," said Richard Markel, president and director of the Assn. for Wedding Professionals International.

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."

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Business is up for hotels, bakers and photographers as same-sex couples prepare to wed.

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
June 02, 2008

But they've picked up now. 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."

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California counties can begin issuing marriage licenses to

same-sex couples beginning June 17.

M.V. Lee Badgett, research director at the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy at the UCLA School of Law, estimates that gay weddings could provide a \$370-million boost to the state economy.

That estimate presumes that about half of California's 92,000 same-sex couples will tie the knot, multiplied by \$8,040, the amount of money from savings accounts that Badgett figures same-sex couples will use on their weddings.

Event planners, restaurants, tent and chair rental agencies, florists, caterers and hotels should all get a piece of that pie, she said.

"There's an opportunity to get a big wedding windfall," she said.

There are, of course, some caveats. No one can accurately project how many gay couples will spend thousands of dollars on weddings. And the legality of gay weddings is potentially short-lived, as officials verify petition signatures for a proposed Nov. 4 ballot initiative that would prohibit same-sex marriage.

Still, wedding-related companies that traditionally market to the gay and lesbian community are finding business is picking up.

Mitch Goldstone, president of Irvine-based photo service ScanMyPhotos.com, said he has gotten more than 300 requests for wedding invitations with photos on them since the court ruling.

"I guess people are still concerned about dealing with unsympathetic local photo labs," he said.

Rosa, the baker, said a lesbian couple came to him for their cake after a bakery in San Bernardino said it was booked for the summer and couldn't make their wedding cake when a clerk saw the two women together.

Other businesses are trying to capture the attention of gay and lesbian couples.

Susan Goldman, a wedding photographer, registered the domain name biggayweddings.com a month ago so she could market her services to same-sex couples. The Ramada hotel in West Hollywood is promoting a honeymoon special, and the West Hollywood Marketing & Visitors Bureau is launching an ad in a magazine for the gay community, selling West Hollywood as a good place for weddings and honeymoons.

<< Previous Page | Next Page >>

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