

The Wedding Gift

DC has a few million reasons to support marriage equality

| By Katie Knorovsky |

When same-sex marriage is legalized in the District on March 2, local gay couples will get an earful—from chapel bells to wedding vows, mazel tovs to clinking flutes. As for area business owners and wedding vendors? Their ears will be ringing, too—with a satisfying “ka-ching!”

It’s not crass to note that equal rights can translate to dollars for the District. In fact, supporters call the law a near-perfect union of marriage equality and economic self-interest. “Being the first in the area to allow same-sex marriage is an incredible opportunity for our businesses,” says Mark Guenther, executive director of the Capital Area Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

“The South is up for grabs,” says Lee Badgett, research director of the Williams Institute, a think tank at UCLA’s law school that studies the economic impact of gay-marriage laws. “Most same-sex couples living in Southern states have very little expectation their states will allow same-sex marriages in the near future.” As a result, legalization of marriage gives DC added appeal, both for prospective residents and betrothed tourists.

According to the Williams Institute, gay weddings in DC could spawn up to \$52.2 million in direct spending over the next three years, creating some 700 new jobs. That counts revenue from an estimated 1,882 Washington couples, or half of the District’s same-sex couples, as well as roughly 12,550 nuptial-seeking tourists—without taking hotel guests and gifts into account.

Of course the shrewdest Washington vendors have been saying “I do” to the new market long before the 30-day congressional review period expired, in a race down the aisle to reel in the so-called “pink dollar.” Serving same-sex couples is not just about making money, says Sharon Cavileer, spokesperson of Arlington’s Main Event Caterers. “It’s the right thing to do,” she says. “But just like we’ve discovered with green initiatives, it’s great for business, as well.”

Politics aside, an open and affluent market is an appealing market; though, this consumer is unique. “Basically, businesses need to put on a new hat and just being ready for all the business,” Guenther says. He and others stress that authenticity and sensitivity are essential in the efforts to appeal to gay brides’ and grooms’ hearts—and pocketbooks. “These couples have long been an under-served market, making it a slam dunk for thoughtful business owners,” says Kathryn Hamm, president of Arlington-based *GayWeddings.com*, a pioneering online planning resource launched 11 years ago. Hamm offers the advice that vendors would be wise to show their inclusivity with targeted ads and Web presences that clearly state openness and display photos of real same-sex couples—not stock photography—and avoid tradition-based wedding-speak, which can be alienating to gay couples.



MARRIAGE AND MONEY The icing on the cake of marriage equality is that it brings a business boom to DC, with millions of dollars in the balance.

One team of nuptial pros is celebrating this landmark in a unique way. Wedding photographer Michael Kress, coordinator Jodi Moraru, designer Kelly Jenkins and caterer Steve Dunn have joined forces to offer up a free complete wedding package—from rings to reception—to one lucky same-sex couple. The “Freedom to Wed” sweepstakes is both a boost for equality and a marketing campaign. Learn more and vote at freedom2wed.com.

This savvy set is hardly alone. “We’ve always been active in the LGBT community, but in light of the announcement by the DC City Council, we expanded our engagement,” explains Dani Elhachem, general manager of The Liaison Capitol Hill hotel. Once the bill passed in December, the hotel extended its Pride Package rates through 2010. In addition to cocktails and breakfast at Art and Soul, each package booked includes a small donation to gay-rights nonprofit White Knot for Equality.

Advocates say gay marriage could prove itself a boon for the transient DC tax base. “The District stands to gain, as gay couples look to move here,” Hamm says. “I can’t imagine a gay couple would choose Virginia at this point, when there’s the chance to have marriage legally recognized.”

But tax dollars aren’t the only assets new residents might bring to the table. After Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage, the state welcomed an influx of young, well-educated denizens—a happy aftershock, she says, could reverberate in DC, too. “As a marker of a progressive place to live, gay marriage is the line in the sand,” Guenther says. ■