

Businesses see dollar signs if Nevada reverses gay marriage ban

By Andrea Domanick, Las Vegas Sun

“Loosen his bow tie and snuggle up, you two,” says Las Vegas photographer Linda Quackenboss, directing a camera-shy couple sitting for portraits in her studio.

Reaching out, Phil Pineda does as he’s told and loosens Mel Cole’s bow tie. “There’s my GQ smile!” the 53-year-old tells the couple, who will be celebrating their fifth anniversary this fall. “Maybe I can shoot your wedding soon.”

For Quackenboss, who estimates that 30 percent of her clientele are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, the suggestion is more than friendly conversation. It’s marketing.

Gay marriage is on the horizon in Nevada. A bill was introduced last week in the Nevada Senate that would begin to clear the way for legalizing gay marriage in Nevada. That news came just days before the U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments in a pair of cases challenging California’s ban on gay marriage and the federal Defense of Marriage Act. Polling suggests a majority of Nevadans support gay marriage.

That shift, in Nevada and nationwide, is being noticed by wedding industry professionals like Quackenboss, who is among local business owners positioning themselves for the opportunities that will come with legal gay marriage in the Wedding Capital of the World.

“With the economic climate the way it is, people are watching

what's happening around the country with a careful eye and will open up as soon as business demands it," Quackenboss said.

According to economist M.V. Lee Badgett, research director of the Williams Institute for Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy at UCLA, legalizing gay marriage would generate \$23 million to \$52 million in business revenue and \$1.8 million to \$4.2 million in tax revenue over the next three years in Nevada.

The brunt of the revenue impact from gay marriages, however, would come from out-of-state couples bringing their ceremonies and celebrations to Las Vegas: Eighty-five percent of the 86,203 marriage licenses issued in Clark County in 2012 were to couples from outside Southern Nevada.

"Vegas' strengths lie in the fact that it is an event town," said Kathryn Hamm, president of GayWeddings.com. "It has a vibrant collection of wedding chapels, it's a destination location for many, can serve bachelor and bachelorette parties and honeymoons alike, and has featured on its stages every gay icon who has ever electrified and unified and entertained our community."

The same-sex marriage industry in New York offers some inkling of what to expect in Las Vegas. In 2011, the first year gay couples could legally wed in New York state, marriage license fees, celebrations and wedding-related purchases helped shore up New York City's economy by \$259 million, according to the New York City Clerk's Office and NYC & Company, the city's tourism and marketing bureau.

Dianne Schiller, owner of Renta-Dress and Tux Shop in Las Vegas, said she can hardly wait. "It would definitely increase my business and add another dimension to it," said Schiller, whose shop presented a fashion show at last month's LGBT Wedding Expo at Circus Circus and has been marketing to gay

couples for years. "If we really want to sell ourselves as the Wedding Capital of the World, we need to open the doors and embrace everyone."

Same-sex marriage ceremonies would come at an otherwise dour time for the wedding business. Marriage licenses issued in Clark County are down 21 percent from 2007, and Schiller's sales have dropped 20 percent this quarter.

"The last place people are spending their money now is on vacations and big weddings," she said. "But generally speaking, gay couples do tend to have more disposable income and are higher up on the earning bracket. They have the dollars, and if they could spend it on weddings, I think they would love it."

For Angie Kelly, owner of Peachy Keen Unions, a Las Vegas-based wedding officiant service that bills itself as a provider of "ceremonies for unique and eclectic couples," the anticipated boost in revenue would be less important than the level playing field that would come with the legalization of gay marriage. She's one of the few officiants in town who openly advertises as serving LGBT couples, and she acknowledged that she may be losing business by doing so.

"I think officiants have a tricky spot with same-sex marriages. If you advertise to same-sex marriages, there's a chance you're losing your highly religious couples, as well. It doesn't matter to me, but it is a risk that I take," she said of the 200 ceremonies she performs per year, a handful of which are for same-sex couples. She explained that while many other ministers and officiants won't advertise to same-sex couples, they may still perform commitment ceremonies if asked. "I think there will be a big sense of relief that they can just breathe easy and serve this market. A lot of us are gunning for it be legalized."

For other local businesses, welcoming gay marriage is a

natural next step in their marketing efforts to the LGBT community. Caesars Entertainment is one of a number of resort companies already offering commitment ceremony packages at its properties, including planning services, floral design, photo shoots and commitment certificates. The company has helped attract such popular LGBT events as Dinah Vegas, or Girl Bar Dinah Shore Weekend, an offshoot of the long-running Dinah Shore Weekend in Palm Springs, and is among the businesses that signed an amicus brief on Feb. 27 urging the U.S. Supreme Court to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act and recognize gay marriages.

MGM Resorts International, which in 2004 became the first company in the gaming and hospitality industry to offer health benefits to gay employees' partners, similarly anticipates gay marriage in Nevada with open arms.

"Legalization in Nevada would be a significant step forward in leveling the playing field, as we'd be in a better position to compete with destinations where same-sex marriage is legal," said Alan Feldman, MGM Resorts senior vice president of public affairs.

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, which launched its LGBT marketing campaign in the mid-2000s, declined to comment for this story.

Although many local businesses are primed to take advantage of the potential revenue boost, others, including Las Vegas' numerous faith-based chapels, do not serve same-sex couples for religious reasons. They say that probably won't change, even if the law does.

"I have gay people who work for me and I love them dearly and I have nothing against them. But we're a Bible-based chapel, and we go according to the word of God and what he says in his word," said Charolette Richards, the Christian owner of the Little White Wedding Chapel, which does not offer commitment

ceremonies for gay couples. “If the law changed, I’m not saying that I would or that I wouldn’t either, but it’s against my religion. I’d have to pray hard to find what God would have me to do.”

Chapels that cater to same-sex couples say that just means more business for them – but that any economic gains are ancillary to the reason many of them began serving the LGBT community in the first place.

Just two doors up from the Little White Wedding Chapel is the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel, which performs more than 5,000 weddings, vow renewals and commitment ceremonies each year, and is perhaps known best for its campy, Elvis-emblazoned neon sign beckoning visitors on the north end of the Strip. The chapel’s owners are gay, and they also operate under the name of Gay Chapel of Las Vegas. As one of the first wedding chapels in Las Vegas to cater to gay couples – it began performing commitment ceremonies more than 15 years ago – being able to perform legal marriages for the LGBT community is a long time coming.

“For us it’s a big deal. It would not only be a chance for us to provide more weddings and beautiful ceremonies, but also a chance for customers who are gay to have the same legal rights,” said Brian Mills, the chapel’s general manager and an Elvis wedding performer. “This being Vegas, all of us who work here are performers and have friends and people we know who would be affected by the social impact. And it’s about that more than anything.”