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Firms expect economic windfall from gay marriage in District

By [Sandhya Somashekhar](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Robin Sutliff's flower shop is redolent with the ingredients of a perfect wedding place setting: tall stands of white amaryllis, cala lilies imported from South America, summery clusters of yellow-orange orchids. When she imagines the many same-sex couples likely to tie the knot in the District this spring, though, her mind settles on the humble hyacinth.



Robin Sutliff's Ultra Violet flower shop and other businesses that make much of their money on weddings could benefit from the law, which must be reviewed by Congress. (Linda Davidson/the Washington Post)

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"It's a pretty flower," said Sutliff, owner of [Ultra Violet florist](#) in Georgetown. "It smells good, and it's strong. It represents spring and new birth."

On Friday, Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) signed legislation to legalize same-sex marriage in the District, a move that is expected to be a financial boon for the city and for vendors such as Sutliff, who make much of their money on weddings but who have struggled during the recession. District officials surmise that the regional economy could reap up to \$22 million over the next three years as couples from Washington and elsewhere take advantage of the new law, and the Williams Institute, a think tank at the University of California at Los Angeles, estimates that the infusion could be \$52 million.

But the betrothed are not lining up quite yet. The law is subject to a 30-day review period by Congress, and opponents have taken their objections to court. Although many expect the bill to pass unhindered this spring, couples say the memory of [California's Proposition 8](#) remains fresh in their minds. The 2008 voter-approved initiative banned same-sex marriage in

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the state after it had been legalized, a setback to many hopeful couples and a stunning reversal to those who thought gay marriage was on the path to mainstream acceptance.

"We're waiting to make sure that it makes the 30 days. We don't want to do too much dreaming," said Mike Giordano, 42, a social worker from Northwest Washington who expects to marry his longtime partner next year but has not made any plans.

Industry develops

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Six years after Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage and long after same-sex commitment ceremonies have become routine, a robust industry has developed around what many say is a tradition that has special needs. Arlington County-based [GayWeddings.com](#), for example, sells dual groom and dual bride cake tops. Wedding announcements available on [Outvite.com](#) include interlocking hearts fashioned to look like the symbol for female.

Both Web sites reported an uptick in traffic from Washington area customers in the past few weeks, and other vendors are expecting a significant increase in business this spring. Hotels such as the Kimpton chain, which is popular among gay travelers, are developing plans to heavily market their D.C. venues nationally as ideal for same-sex destination weddings.

"We're all ramping up in anticipation that this is going to be big for the wedding industry here," said [Allison Britton](#), an Alexandria-based photographer.

This month, Britton attended a seminar in the District led by Boston-based wedding planner [Bernadette Coveney Smith](#), a self-described gay wedding expert who has been planning same-sex nuptials since Massachusetts legalized them in 2003. The seminar attracted about 40 caterers, videographers and other vendors hoping to have the advantage when the expected marriage rush begins.

Among Coveney Smith's tips: Forget about the pink triangles and rainbow-hued Web sites that scream "gay." Those historically significant but dated images don't always appeal to modern couples, she said. A more subtle idea might be for photographers to consider sprinkling photos of a few same-sex couples in their portfolios. And words matter. For example, potential customers might be turned off if they are asked, "What are the names of the bride and groom?"

Coveney Smith said she is certain there will be a wedding rush in a couple of months, when the law could be officially on the books, just as the industry got a bump in Massachusetts, Connecticut and other states that have permitted same-sex unions. According to the Williams Institute, about 12,000 gay weddings took place in Massachusetts between 2004 and 2009, pumping more than \$111 million into the state's economy.

Powerful tool for change

She said she is hopeful that gay marriage in the District will be a powerful and persuasive tool to push for friendlier legislation at the federal level.

"There are literal transformations that happen at gay weddings, when couples validate their relationship in a legal way. You see it happening, and there's never a dry eye in that ceremony," she said. "When congressmen start knowing more gay people and start getting invited to gay weddings, that's the kind of thing that changes minds and changes policy."

When Giordano, 42, does permit himself to think about his wedding, he imagines a low-key and intimate ceremony at [All Souls Unitarian Church](#), where he, his partner, Bob Wittig, and their 5-year-old daughter attend services and where Fenty signed the law. A simple church wedding would have been unimaginable a decade ago, when he and Wittig held a commitment ceremony in Harpers Ferry. It is a reminder of how far the movement has come, he said, adding that the work is hardly done.

The new law will not have significant legal benefits for Giordano's family. The District's domestic partnership law affords almost the same rights, but Giordano would still be barred from receiving the federal benefits extended to married couples, such as those of Social Security, under the [1996 Defense of Marriage Act](#).

The gain is primary psychological, he said, which is why it is emotionally safer to wait until the law is finalized.

"People my age and older grew up closeted, with self-hatred, feeling like we were terrible," he said. "It's a huge step that the government is saying that our relationships are just as valid as straight relationships."

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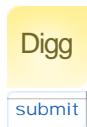
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