

In Gay-Marriage Ruling, Boom for Provincetown

By JOHN LELAND

PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — After the tourists and the drag queens disappear for the winter, the pace of this Cape Cod village most years slows to a small-town lull. But on a recent afternoon, Dave Schermacher, a caterer here, stared down at a to-do list that spilled over two pages. Mr. Schermacher, who runs P-Town Parties, had been busy since 6:30 a.m., already preparing for nine weddings next summer and fall.

"It's off the wall," he said, pouring a mug of half-decaf coffee (the real thing gets him too wired). "I have nine weddings to prepare menus for. I'm building a Web site and revamping my brochures. And I have to reserve chairs, glasses, dishes and silver now, or they'll be all booked

up."

Since Massachusetts' highest court ruled in November that gay couples have a right to marry under the State Constitution, Provincetown — a clamorous beach community known for its gay-friendly atmosphere and night life — has been gearing up for an unlikely windfall: the wedding business. Already one inn, the Fairbanks, is offering a \$195 "Pop the Question" special.

The court gave the state legislature 180 days to make provisions for same-sex couples, which some legal experts say may turn out to be civil unions, as in Vermont, rather than standard marriages.

In the meantime, groups opposed to gay marriage have urged the legislature to amend the Constitution to ban it, and have lobbied President Bush to back a similar amendment

to the United States Constitution.

The 180-day period ends May 17, a date that has become etched in the minds of Provincetown's couples, business owners and town officials.

However much bustle there is already, "that's when the real deluge will start," said Steve Melamed, an owner of Bayside Betsy's, a restaurant and caterer, who says he has already booked two weddings, of 120 and 82 guests, and received a steady stream of e-mail inquiries from couples who are not yet ready to book.

The weddings, Mr. Melamed said, are approximately double the size of gay commitment ceremonies he has catered in the past. But for couples hoping to marry in the summer, when the town population swells to as many as 50,000 from fewer than 4,000, Mr. Melamed had a word of caution.

"I wouldn't consider closing the restaurant for a party on a summer weekend," he said. "To be frank, you

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Photographs by Robert Spencer for The New York Times

If businesses that celebrate weddings are busy in Provincetown, people who perform and license them expect to be. Two are the Rev. Alison Hyder and Doug Johnstone, the town clerk.

Gay-Marriage Ruling in Massachusetts Brings Boom to Provincetown

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can't give up the night. It's not fair to your regular customers."

Since 1992, the town has issued domestic partnership licenses, which give partners visitation rights in the town jail and hospital, and ensure that if a couple with children split up, both partners will have custody rights. All those rights apply only within Provincetown.

The prospect of marriage, though, with full rights and privileges, has added new urgency to the town chatter, said Lynne Davies, who with her partner, Barbara J. Levison, runs Provincetown Soap Works, which provides favors for many ceremonies.

"I don't think we've had one conversation that wasn't 'So, are you going to get married? So, are you getting more bookings?'" Ms. Davies said. "It's replaced 'How are you?'"

The pace of life in the off-season has quickened, Ms. Levison added. Most years, the locals use the months after Halloween to catch up with the friends they are too busy to see during the summer.

"I guess we lost our calm season,"

Ms. Levison said. "But I'm not complaining. Let's face it, everyone's trying to make a buck, through this or otherwise."

Wedding providers are not yet scrambling for the last corsage, but in a small town that is 65 congested miles out from the western edge of the cape, a sudden spate of nuptials may pinch the local resources. Photographers, florists and classical musicians — and even sites for big events — are typically in short supply in any case, and book up early.

"You can't buy a tie in town," said Bob Anderson, who runs the Land's End Inn and the Brass Key with his partner, Michael MacIntyre. "We've had to lend ties to people."

Mr. Anderson and Mr. MacIntyre recently went to a mall in Boston to pick out invitations for their own wedding, which they plan for Memorial Day weekend. But they have had to turn down requests from other wedding parties, Mr. Anderson said. "People call us and say, 'We'll take the whole inn.' Well, that's already booked up for the whole week."

"It would be great if the time you got married was a Tuesday night in January," he added. "Then all the restaurants and hotels would be free."

The quiet off-season of a gay resort vanishes.

At Heritage House, Sarah Peake and Lynn Mogell have gotten about a dozen inquiries about weddings, but have booked only one: their own. "We never had a commitment ceremony in the past, because we were waiting for legal rights," Ms. Peake said.

Though some couples opt for two tuxedos or two wedding gowns, Ms. Peake has simpler plans. "We're thinking shorts and Hawaiian shirts," she said.

Gift stores are scurrying to add wedding registries; one struggling retailer, Roger Chauvette, closed his collectibles shop to go into the wedding planning business.

"Here was a need that was not being filled," said Mr. Chauvette, who is also a poet and former clergyman. "Marriage planning doesn't require retail space."

At the Town Hall, Doug Johnstone,

the town clerk, is expecting a crunch of paperwork. Already, he said, his office is fielding a steady stream of inquiries. Couples who want to marry must submit results of blood tests and fill out a form with the help of a clerk. Each form takes about 15 or 20 minutes to prepare.

"There could be lines of people out the door," Mr. Johnstone said. Since he cannot hire a larger staff, he said, he plans to set up desks in the hallway, where local retirees will be able to volunteer in lieu of paying taxes.

Even so, he worries that there will not be enough supplies to go around.

"Where do you get a typewriter these days?" he said. "We're looking for people with good penmanship."

Mr. Johnstone is also applying to become a justice of the peace, so he can perform weddings; his fees would go to the town.

At the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House down the street, the Rev. Alison Hyder is gearing up for her own overbooked season.

Most years, Ms. Hyder officiates at some 30 to 40 commitment ceremonies or heterosexual weddings, she said, often scheduling two a day. This year, though, she has had many more requests, which usually do not

start until spring.

"A lot of people are asking about the legal ramifications," she said, "none of which I can explain."

Ms. Hyder said she might have to deputize members of the church to perform ceremonies. "I'm pretty sure that legally, churches can deputize whomsoever they choose," she said. "But they would only be authorized to do weddings."

For all the anticipation, though, an air of uncertainty hangs over the season, at least until the state legislature responds to the court order. In Seattle, Ken Molsberry and his partner, Chris Vincent, would like to marry in Provincetown on June 4, the anniversary of their meeting, though neither has ever been to the town.

"We're in a ticklish situation to see what's going to happen," said Mr. Molsberry, who is disinclined to travel all the way across the country for anything less than a full marriage.

The guest house where the couple has reserved a room requires a 50 percent deposit by Jan. 31.

"We're leaning toward going," Mr. Molsberry said. "But it's a lot of money. If we can't get married, is it going to feel like we've been kicked in the teeth?"