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Arizona could profit from gay marriage, study finds

Ronald J. Hansen, The Republic | azcentral.com Published 5:33 p.m. MT June 10, 2014 | Updated 5:47 p.m. MT June 10, 2014

The report assumes half of Arizona's nearly 16,000 same-sex couples counted in the 2010 census would get married within three years.



(Photo: Getty Images)

Legalizing gay marriage could bring \$60 million to Arizona's economy and support up to 500 jobs around the state, a [study by lawyers](http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AZ-Econ-Impact-June-2014.pdf) (<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AZ-Econ-Impact-June-2014.pdf>) and economists for UCLA has found.

The report assumes half of Arizona's nearly 16,000 same-sex couples counted in the 2010 census would get married within three years. It also assumes wedding budgets that are a quarter of the \$24,000 average 2012 budget for nuptials in Arizona. The resulting new spending would create greater demand for related jobs and services, much of it in the first year, the report's authors claim.

The report was produced by UCLA's Williams Institute, which researches sexual orientation and gender-identity law and public policy.

"Using this estimate, we expect resident same-sex couples to generate \$47.5 million in direct wedding spending over the introductory three-year period," the report said. Assuming there are 16 out-of-state guests, as seen in Massachusetts, and they stay one night, gay marriage would bring 126,000 visitors and more than \$14 million in additional spending.

Tom Rex, associate director of the Center for Competitiveness and Prosperity Research at the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University, said the study is reasonable but overstates the economic impact of gay marriage because spending by in-state couples should be excluded from such calculations.

"The reality is that by spending \$6,000 on the wedding they aren't spending that money on something else," he said of spending by in-state couples. "It makes (the impact) seem a little bigger than it really is."

Rex said if correct, the estimated impact amounts to one-ten thousandth of the Arizona economy.

Because of Arizona's status as a tourist destination, its gains from visitors and couples who would come here to be married is likely larger than estimated, said Christy Mallory, a lawyer for the Williams Institute and one of the report's authors.

The assumptions about the share of same-sex couples getting married and their wedding plans are drawn from the limited data from Massachusetts and other states where it is legal, Mallory said.

Currently, 17 states and the District of Columbia allow gay marriage.

For now, Arizona is one of the states whose laws regarding gay marriage haven't changed at the ballot box or been upended by the courts. That could change if groups challenging the state's prohibition of marriage for same-sex couples win in court.

A case challenging Nevada's ban on gay marriage is pending in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and could impact similar laws throughout the West, Mallory said.

Courts have already overturned bans in 12 other states, including Idaho, Oklahoma and Utah, according to Freedom to Marry, a group that advocates legalizing gay marriage.

If Arizona's ban on gay marriage changed, polling suggests the public, if not the Legislature, is ready for it.

"After years of beating the drums against same-sex marriage, opponents of the idea in Arizona appear to be losing their grip on public attitudes toward the issue," the non-partisan Behavior Research Center found in one of its Rocky Mountain Polls in 2013. "By a ratio of 55 percent to 35 percent, Arizonans say they favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry."

Earlier this year, both chambers of the Arizona Legislature passed Senate Bill 1062, which ostensibly protected the religious considerations of businesses to serve customers and causes of their choice. The bill was widely seen as allowing discrimination against the gay community, and Gov. Jan Brewer vetoed it after heavy pushback from the state's business community.

The Williams Institute study suggests Arizona could cash in even more while gay marriage remains in flux.

Colorado and Texas are two of the top five states for out-of-state marriages performed in Arizona. Those states don't allow gay marriage and have an estimated 60,000 same-sex couples, the report notes.

While some of Arizona's gay couples have already gotten married elsewhere, that is likely more than offset by people elsewhere who would come to Arizona to be married, Mallory said.

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