

# Same-sex weddings could mean economic gain

By Carolyn Morrisroe  
editor@highlandsnews.com

A ruling allowing same-sex marriage in North Carolina could boost business in popular wedding destinations such as Highlands.

On Friday, Oct. 10, a federal judge cleared the way for counties in the state to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Two couples in Macon County obtained marriage li-

censes on Monday, Oct. 13, according to Register of Deeds Todd Raby. He said his office is ready to perform its duties.

“We’re prepared,” Raby said. “It’s the law and we follow the law. We do not pass judgment.”

The Macon County Register of Deeds office began using gender-neutral forms on Tuesday, replacing those identifying a “bride” and “groom” with forms naming “applicant 1”

and “applicant 2.”

In Jackson County, one same-sex couple obtained a marriage license as of Tuesday morning, according to Shandra Sims, deputy at the Jackson County Register of Deeds.

While these numbers are small, many couples who get married in Highlands come from outside the region. Nearby Buncombe County, which encompasses Asheville, recorded 73 marriage licenses issued to

same-sex couples as of Tuesday afternoon.

Macon County is ranked 10th in the state by ratio of same-sex couples, with 90 same-sex couples, or 6.18 per 1,000 households, according to a report by the Williams Institute that used U.S. Census figures. The study says Jackson County has 96 same-sex couples, or 5.83 per 1,000 households.

Same-sex weddings could greatly increase business for

the wedding industry in the state. On Oct. 9, the Williams Institute, a think tank at the UCLA School of Law, released a study showing the economic impact of legalizing same-sex marriage. It states that total spending on weddings and related tourism would add an estimated \$64.4 million to the state and local economy of North Carolina over the course of three years, with \$41.2 million of that in the first year

alone.

The study predicts that 9,155 in-state same-sex couples would choose to marry in the first three years after legalization. This is based on the fact that the most recent census counted 18,309 same-sex couples living in North Carolina, and that in other states where same-sex marriage has become legal, about half of Census-counted same-sex couples

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decided to get married.

The UCLA study did not take into account out-of-state couples marrying in North Carolina, although data from other states shows that this could bring in a significant amount of wedding business, as well.

Bob Kieltyka, executive director at the Highlands Chamber of Commerce, said weddings are a significant contributor to room nights and the occupancy tax in town.

In 2012, North Carolina voters passed a constitutional amendment stating that marriage between one man and one woman would be the only domestic legal union valid or recognized in the state. In July, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed a lower court ruling in Virginia in favor of extending marriage rights.

On Oct. 6, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review several lower court same-sex marriage rulings, including the case in the Fourth Circuit, of which North Carolina is a part. That

meant the original rulings would stand and opened the door for same-sex marriage to be legal in those jurisdictions.

Late on Friday, Oct. 10, U.S. District Court Judge Max Cogburn Jr. in Asheville issued a ruling that the state’s ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional.

Equality NC lauded the decision to make same-sex marriage legal in the state.

“Today’s ruling allowing loving, same-sex couples to marry across North Carolina is a historic moment for our state,” said Chris Sgro, executive director of Equality NC. “With it, we celebrate with so many North Carolinians who have worked tirelessly over decades to change hearts, minds and unequal laws in the state we call home. Love won and the barriers to it are done.”

On Tuesday, U.S. District Judge William Osteen Jr. in Greensboro also declared the state’s ban on same-sex marriage invalid, but allowed an appeal requested by State Senate Leader Phil Berger and House Speaker Thom Tillis. That could potentially lead the case back to the Fourth Circuit.

Berger and Tillis issued a joint statement Friday evening in response to Judge Cogburn’s injunction against the marriage amendment, vowing to keep fighting.

“We promised to defend the will of North Carolina voters because they — not judges and not politicians — define marriage as between one man and one woman,” they stated. “It is disappointing this decision was made without North Carolina’s law receiving its day in court, and we will continue to work to ensure the voice of the voters is heard.”

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina praised Osteen’s decision.

“This second ruling further emphasizes that North Carolina’s now-defunct marriage ban was discriminatory and denied same-sex couples their constitutional rights to due process and equal protection under the law,” said Chris Brook, legal director for the ACLU of North Carolina. “The legislature can attempt to pursue an appeal if they so choose; however, that would only unnecessarily expend taxpayer resources. North Carolinians can rest assured:

the freedom to marry is here to stay.”

On Sunday, Gov. Pat McCrory told Carolina Connection, the student radio station at the University of North Carolina, that he would respect the judge’s decision.

“The ruling is law and it’s my job as governor to enforce the laws,” he said. “There are some court rulings that I agree with and some court rulings I disagree with. But after they make the ruling it is my job to enforce the law. ... And I will execute the law in a professional and respectful way, whether I agree with it or not.

McCrory called same-sex marriage a “major cultural change” that would have many implications for the public and private sector and that people would have to adapt to.

“I think it’s a time for healing on all sides,” he said. “Now that the disagreement has been resolved in the courts, it’s our job to live together, and work together and play together and respect each other together.”