

Will 'Gay Riviera' tourism slump?

Pensacola unsure how visitors will react to publicity

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PENSACOLA — A loving couple walks hand in hand along a sugar-white beach, the sun glistening off the blue-green Gulf of Mexico.

It is the kind of idyllic scene that could be travel poster material — but with a difference: The lovers are men.

For at least two decades, thousands of homosexuals have flocked to Pensacola and nearby beaches on holiday weekends. No one paid much attention — until recently.

Then, a local television station reported on the annual influx, and a couple of city officials reacted by trying to pull in the welcome mat.

The controversy dragged the "Gay Riviera," as some are calling this area of the Florida Panhandle, out of the closet and raised fears that publicity about it would scare away visitors — homosexual, heterosexual or both.

"It's a Catch-22," said Dee Lucas, tourism and events coordinator for the Santa Rosa

Island Authority at Pensacola Beach. "If the families hear we are a gay-friendly community, they are not going to come."

But she and others insist gay and straight tourists can coexist.

"The beaches are a major attraction, they always have been for people from all walks of life, and they'll continue to be," said Pensacola Mayor Jerry Maygarden. "There's no one in the Pensacola community that I know of who's engaged in any kind of a witch hunt or anxious to run anybody off."

The mayor, however, contributed to the controversy by voicing support for Councilman Doug Proffitt, who wrote a letter to WEAR-TV disputing the characterization of Pensacola as gay-friendly in its news report.

Proffitt wrote that "all God-loving people in the world are unfriendly to this very small group of people" and that he didn't want the city to become "another San Francisco, the object of jokes around the world."

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Pensacola is out of the closet — but worried

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Others supported the mayor and councilman in calls and letters to the editor. But there were also threats of a gay boycott against the city, the *Pensacola News Journal* editorialized that Proffitt and Maygarden were out of line, and some merchants accused them of driving away valuable business.

Pensacola gays, particularly business owners, reacted by urging homosexuals across the nation to visit in even greater numbers during the Memorial Day weekend and stamped "GAY MONEY" on their currency to dramatize the importance of gay tourism to the local economy.

Mike Varvel, co-owner of The Numbers, one of five gay bars in Pensacola, said he told gay friends elsewhere: "If you all boycott us, you are falling into their hands. That's what they want you to do."

Gays came to Pensacola in record numbers during the holiday weekend, said Andy Anderson, who publishes *Christopher Street South Quarterly*, a magazine that promotes Pensacola tourism

among gays.

She estimated 37,000 gay tourists visited the area, based on a count of cars at the "gay beach" on Santa Rosa Island, a 50-mile-long barrier island.

Gays congregate along a 7-mile section between the communities of Pensacola Beach and Navarre Beach. But Anderson said there were so many visitors they spilled into adjacent areas.

"Many of our business people are sending letters to the mayor, thanking him and Mr. Proffitt for doing what we couldn't do," she said.

However, gay tourists knew little or nothing of the city officials' comments until they got here, and many had made reservations long before the controversy arose, said Tom Elmlinger, a frequent visitor from Nashville, Tenn.

Atlanta tourist Bob Davis said, "I found it rather comical — disheartening, but comical. I wasn't trying to prove anything by coming."

Pensacola's coming out began in January when it was included in an *Out* magazine article about the nation's top homosexual vaca-

tion spots. Others listed: Provincetown and Cape Cod in Massachusetts; Orient Point on Long Island in New York; Cape May, N.J.; Eureka Springs, Ark.; Saugatuck, Mich.; Santa Fe, N.M.; and Seattle.

Anderson said she had tried to publicize Pensacola's place in gay tourism because the community had never before appreciated the millions of dollars gays pumped into the local economy.

But she and other Pensacola homosexuals have successfully discouraged demonstrations or marches by gay and AIDS rights groups such as ACT-UP.

"We are trying to keep low-key," Anderson said. "We want to blend with the straight community."

Elmlinger said if anything, Pensacola, which prided itself on Southern hospitality, had become even friendlier than in the past.

"As with any minority, you want to have an opportunity to be with your own people," Elmlinger said. "You can let your guard down a little bit. You live in a straight world seven days a week."