

Hampton Roads' LGBT consumers may hold pot of gold at end of rainbow

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Jun 16, 2017



A view from Hilton Norfolk The Main, looking toward Norfolk's World Trade Center and Town Point Park, the site of Saturday's gay pride festival.

Rainbow flags can be seen on the streets of Hampton Roads as the region prepares for a series of celebrations for the LGBTQ community, wrapping up a month of gay pride celebrations.

Hampton Roads PrideFest alone expects 25,000 to 30,000 visitors from across the Mid-Atlantic for Saturday's festival in Norfolk's Town Point Park. Many of these visitors have booked hotels for the weekend and restaurants, stores and other tourism-related businesses expect big business.

The estimated purchasing power of LGBTQ adults in the U.S. ranges around \$1 trillion. Witeck Communications released a study last year that showed a four percent increase to \$917 billion while the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce estimates buying power at \$1.7 trillion.

The Hampton Roads region is no exception. In fact, a 2015 Gallup study ranked the Virginia Beach-Norfolk metropolitan area as 12th out of 50 metropolitan areas with the highest proportion of LGBTQ adults (4.4 percent of our population). Old Dominion University's 2016 State of the Region Report estimated the LGBTQ working-age adult's average income in Hampton Roads totaled \$2.017 billion, about 4.8 percent of total income of adults between the ages of 25 and 64.

This large purchasing power isn't because LGBTQ adults are earning more than their heterosexual counterparts. In fact, studies cited in the State of the Region show gay men and lesbian women earn about five and nine percent less, respectively, than their heterosexual male coworkers.

Rather, this purchasing power comes from large disposable incomes due to the fact LGBTQ households often have two full incomes without any children and related expenses, said Michael Berlucchi, president of Hampton Roads Pride. LGBTQ households are changing, however, as some couples now start families and raise children.

Much of this disposable income goes toward travel, hence the interest of the tourism industries. Virginia Tourism Corporation data shows LGBTQ visitors stay longer and spend more than their non-LGBTQ counterparts.

The Downtown Norfolk Council emailed local businesses with a list of suggestions on how to make the most of the gay pride festival and potential customers. Suggestions included showing off rainbow clothes, flags, signs, drinks and food along with offering discounts to people who wear rainbow colors in support. The council even offered to distribute rainbow flags and necklaces for free.

Various cities and organizations in Hampton Roads have different plans on how to engage with businesses and promote their area as an LGBTQ-friendly destination, not just during pride month, but throughout the year.

Ryan Downey of the Hampton Convention and Visitor Bureau said although there

is nothing in Hampton that is exclusively for the LGBTQ consumer, the bureau hosts occasional meeting of local business owners to discuss LGBTQ events and efforts.

Pride events have included a river cruise, in which all proceeds went to ACCESS AIDS, and a historical feature on growing up gay in Hampton Roads called “Our Story, Our Time” presented by the Hampton History Museum.

Liz Parker from the Newport News Hospitality Association roughly estimated LGBTQ visitors generated \$14 million of the \$284 million in tourism revenue in Newport News in 2016. She hopes to form a committee within the association to meet with state legislators in September to figure out how they can attract more LGBTQ business.

“We don’t just try to go out and make money,” Parker said. “We’re here to help the community. Some of us old guards are carrying the torch saying, ‘We mean something, and you do too.’ ”

Virginia Beach, a tourism hub, is no stranger to marketing. The Virginia Beach Convention and Visitor's Bureau has produced an in-flight video for American Airlines featuring LGBTQ locals along with photos of LGBTQ couples, to market weddings at the convention center and the city's ViBe district.

The ViBe district boasts the Rainbow Crosswalk at 19th Street and Cypress Avenue. Virginia Beach leadership, all the way up to the mayor, has embraced this intentional, organic symbol by a local artist, Berlucchi said. Berlucchi also points out one can often see gay couples walking down the boardwalk with their children on a typical night.

“We will never be Miami Beach, but we can make efforts to show that we welcome everyone, that at the very least, there are no barriers to entry. And frankly, I’m not sure that’s the message we’ve always sent,” he said.

Several organizations aim to help businesses overcome the marketing costs of advertising themselves as a destination for LGBTQ consumers.

The Hampton Roads Business OutReach aims to give local businesses national exposure. Tracy Skinner, the outreach group's president, encourages businesses to become certified as an LGBTQ business enterprise through the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce in order to do business with larger corporations like Hilton and American Airlines.

Similarly, the Virginia Tourism Corporation urges business to add a free listing at

[Virginia.Org](#), which reaches 13 million annually. It also offers an extensive LGBTQ tourism resource guide.

LGBTQ acceptance has been on the rise in the last decade since the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Although many are encouraged by the growing acceptance, tourism industries of competing cities have struggled to "break through the noise."

"We have to figure out how to use an authentic voice," Berlucchi said. "It's not enough to just slap a rainbow flag on something and check the box."