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## Wedding festival a hit with brides-to-be

by Rick Catlin. Islander Reporter

If the recently concluded second annual Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival is any indication, the Island is rapidly gaining a reputation as the best place in Florida to hold an island wedding.

Chamber of commerce president Mary Ann Brockman said the response to the second festival was incredible.

“We had 350 people attend our first year and this year we had 761. We more than doubled the number of guests,” she said.

Of the 761 guests, there were 212 who showed up the day of the event, and 249 brides-to-be looking for a place to hold a wedding. And that was with no advertising outside the Tampa Bay area, she said.

A number of brides-to-be booked weddings on the Island, but Brockman did not have an exact number since a number of resorts and merchants took part in the event and sold their own services or booked their own wedding party.

“I don’t know the exact number, but a lot of brides signed up with merchants or resorts that day, and that translates into some good business for the participants and chamber members,” Brockman said.

From last year’s festival, an estimated 100 weddings were booked on Anna Maria Island and there were an estimated 200 to 300 weddings on the Island in 2008, according to David Teitelbaum, a member of the Manatee County Tourist Development Council and owner of several Island resorts and vacation properties.

At least one Island wedding is assured because of the festival.

Carmen Adair of Lakeland said the festival’s approach makes wedding planning much simpler than calling around to find a particular merchant and location.

“This is great. The festival allowed us to speak directly to several local vendors at the same time. That makes planning so much easier,” said Adair, whose son plans a November 2009 wedding on the Island.

Brockman did not have a dollar value for the amount each wedding party would spend on Anna Maria Island, but figures supplied by the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau would indicate the average wedding party accounts for about \$50,000 in spending on the Island. In 2008, an estimated \$10 million was spent in the Island economy by bridal parties.



*Winners of the grand prize of \$10,000 in wedding gifts and merchandise in the second annual Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival were Mary Brouwer and John Derussy of St. Petersburg. The couple attended the festival to plan for a fall 2009 wedding on Anna Maria Island. Islander Photo: Caryn Hodge*

“I think the growth of the festival is just wonderful for our members and those merchants who set up a booth at this year’s event,” said Brockman. “And I can’t thank BrightHouse Network enough,” she added.

The network provided about \$15,000 in free advertising on BayNews9 for this year’s event, and Brockman is hopeful of the same response next year. And next year’s event should be even bigger.

“We’ve already started planning next year’s event and we’re planning on a larger event. The word is getting out. This year, we had people from Canada, Europe, the Virgin Islands and northern states,” she said.

“People either read about it in a newspaper, heard about it by word of mouth or searched the Internet. We had one couple from Ohio that heard about the festival and just flew down that day. It was an unbelievable festival. It exceeded our expectations,” Brockman said.

“When we first started this, we were just hoping for a few people to show up. Now, we had 54 merchants and 761 people, so we’re pretty sure this is going to be a success.”

Brockman noted that several publications, including Destination Weddings and Honeymoons, Tampa Bay Weddings and Brides.com have expressed interest in the 2010 event.

Brockman said the weddings contribute immensely to the Island economy and that contribution will only get bigger.

“These people are the upper-income people who want to stay on the Island, eat on the Island and shop on the Island,” she said.

Brockman also advised merchants and sponsors interested in participating in the 2010 festival to start their planning now for the Feb. 28, 2010 event.

“We’re going to spread our wings. We might even do some advertising out of the area.”

Among the services booked during the festival by brides and bridal parties were caterers, florists, limousine services, resorts and accommodations, venues, hair salons, photographers, entertainers and spas.

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