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USA: Dallas out to corral gay travellers

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The Old West is old news: That's the word from Dallas tourism officials attempting to lure gay and lesbian visitors with a message that the city is a great place for them to spend their time and money.

"Big D" is a diverse metropolitan area that "has left behind stereotypes of big-haired women and rowdy cowboys -- that is, unless you count sassy drag queens and strapping gay rodeo champs," according to a website operated by the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"Our Secret is Out" proclaims the site, which features images of same-sex couples enjoying the local sights.

"It's not about being politically correct, it's about being economically correct," said Phillip Jones, president and CEO of the tourism bureau. He said gay travelers spend an average of \$100 more per day than other travelers and plan four to six trips a year.

The city's appeals won over the Washington-based Family Pride Coalition. The gay family advocacy group conducted its national conference in Dallas this fall after the bureau made a presentation at the organization's Washington, D.C. office.

Though some members were initially reluctant to bring their meeting to Texas -- where a gay-marriage ban passed with 76 percent support last year -- Dallas was chosen over Minneapolis and Chicago, said the group's Executive Director Jennifer Chrisler.

"There's a very large and vibrant gay parenting community in Dallas and an even larger gay and lesbian community in Texas -- that coupled with the fact that Texas is a place where there is still a lot of work to be done to educate people about gays and lesbians and what their lives are like, what their families are like," she said.

About 20 gay-oriented meetings have come to the city since the promotion began two years ago, Jones said. About six events are scheduled over the next year, including a gay rodeo.

The tourism bureau put up the website this year, listing more than 20 gay-friendly hotels, shopping areas, tourist attractions and nightclubs.

"We've come a long way since the days of the saloon," the site says. 'Everyone should experience the queer life and rich history of this `Texas-sized' city."

The effort may already be paying dividends. A survey conducted this year by San Francisco-based Community Marketing lists Dallas tied with San Diego as the seventh top business destination for gay travelers.

Jones took over as head of the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau in late 2003 and began conducting market research to replace a stale perception of the city rooted in the 1980s television show Dallas.

"One of the things that most surprised me about Dallas was the incredible diversity," Jones said. `` We have 120,000 GLBT (Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) households in the Dallas area."

The bureau spends \$50,000 a year of its \$14 million budget to attract gay tourists. But Jones acknowledges that the effort will not make the city competitive with places like San Francisco or Las Vegas.

"If you're looking for your first visit to a gay-friendly destination, it's not going to be Dallas," Jones said.