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Michigan Film office unveils new plan for state's creative industries

Subsidies gone but Macomb liaison optimistic

By Gina Joseph, The Macomb Daily

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The film incentives are gone but the Michigan Film Office is still around.

Only now it's the [Michigan Film & Digital Media Office](#).

“The new name reflects substantive changes to our vision, and is one of many steps in branding Michigan as a preeminent place for filmmakers, digital media artists and producers along with building a home for the range of talent in the state’s creative industries,” said Jenell Leonard, commissioner of the Michigan

Film & Digital Media Office, in a news release announcing the changes.

The original office was established in 1979 to assist in location scouting and creating a director for the state’s film community. Michigan enjoyed the boom in the film industry. Beginning in 2008, tax credits were used to lure production companies to the state.

“Having one of the nation’s most aggressive attraction programs created a lot of excitement with everyone in the creative industries,” said Maria Zardis, with Macomb County Department of Planning and Economic Development business outreach and communication and liaison for [Macomb Film](#).

“Suddenly, all of our in-state people were really busy and loads more natives, who had spent years out in California or New York, were returning to the state. The film programs at Wayne State, University of Michigan and Michigan State University were full of kids, who were getting first-hand exposure to what it was like to work in the industry. And, having Clint Eastwood, George Clooney and Robert DeNiro hanging around town (also) created a pretty good distraction during a pretty dismal time in our economy.”

But the incentives were halted in 2012 in lieu of a cash-rebate, and in July all incentives ceased.

However, from an economic development standpoint, Zardis said the office has always existed to support more and better jobs in the state’s creative industries.

“The average earning of someone working in digital media in Michigan is about \$89,000 per year,” she said.

Michigan has about 270,000 people working in the field and jobs in the industry are projected to grow about 10 percent over the next five years, according to Zardis. That’s the kind of news graduates, who enrolled in film and other digital media are attending programs started back when the incentives were still in place want to hear.

“Our department has always had a good working relationship with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). This includes working with the folks at the Michigan Film & Digital Media Office. As a regional liaison, I participate in regular conference calls with them and other regional film commissioners from throughout the state,” said Zardis, whose office was established in 2008 and made Macomb County the location for several film shoots including Clint Eastwood’s “Gran Torino” scenes at the Center Line VFW Hall, “Red Dawn’s” plane crash in downtown Mount Clemens and the cornfields of Richmond for the set of “Into the Storm.”

Their involvement also gave them a say in the newly minted strategic plan, which included a restructuring of the film office’s 14-member advisory council. Representing a variety of regions and professions including marketing/advertising and education it will now focus on five areas; talent development and networking, promotional marketing, measures and metrics, digital media and finance.

Leonard said the renewed focus is aimed at attracting businesses that create content across all media channels including mobile, CGI, animation, digital, gaming and social media. Among the initiatives demonstrating the new mission is the office’s sponsorship of Digital Summit Detroit, Sept. 22-23.

The event showcases the diverse range of professionals working in digital media and marshalling projects from design to the marketplace. Among the invited guests hosted by the office will be college students from across the state.

“The digital media summit is a great opportunity for students to learn first-hand about the emerging opportunities as they connect with some of the most prominent digital media businesses participating in the summit,” Leonard said.

Bill Ludwig, advisory council chair and former chairman and CEO of Campbell-Ewald Detroit, pointed out the new direction is in response to the challenge to connect private investors with film and digital media entrepreneurs.

“Michigan business built our production business, not Hollywood,” he said. “We’re finding startups in digital and social media content creation (or curation) are looking to private investors for support. We need to find ways for those connections to happen more frequently.”

Prior to the incentives, Michigan ranked third among states in film production but in the last seven years, many of its established post-production businesses closed including Grace and Wilde, Universal Images, Postique, Image Express and Producer’s Color, said Ludwig. “Our approach is to focus on supporting and building the creative industries and production community in Michigan. For the most part, these industries are sustained through commercial and industrial production work.”

Is this new direction going to help?

Absolutely,” said Zardis. “There is a lot happening in downtown Mount Clemens since HunchFree and Eyewyre studios have come to town. Jimmy Gwizdala’s new co-working space on Main Street is making it easy for startups to gain some ground -- and Stage 3 in Warren is still plugging away and growing its CGI portfolio.”

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