

The Texas Film Industry Needs Lawmakers' Help Now

Paul Stekler | March 22, 2021



In the recently released “The News of the World,” Tom Hanks and a young girl take a perilous journey across the Texas of 1870. It’s a lovely film. The landscape of Texas is stunningly filmed. But not a frame of it was actually filmed in Texas.

As the current session of the Texas Legislature begins to heat up, it’s fair to ask how lawmakers’ past actions have helped ensure that other states, like New Mexico, where that film was shot, are frequent stand-ins for Texas on film. And what can be done to change the economic impact on our state.

Back in 2003, the sky was the limit for filmmaking in Texas. Close to \$500 million was spent on productions here and four of the top 10 grossing films in this country were linked to Texas filmmakers. Then our neighboring states began to pump up their incentive programs to attract production away from us. It was eventually so bad that a film titled “Don’t Mess with Texas” was shot in Louisiana.

In an attempt to fight back, the Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program was devised in 2007. In its formula, the money productions would spend in Texas was substantially more than the incentives paid back. Although the program never matched other state incentive programs, it helped stem the tide for a while.

At its height, in 2014-15, \$95 million went into the incentive program and \$442 million was spent on productions. During the next session, though, there was pushback against any governmental involvement, and the incentives were cut by two-thirds to \$32 million. The consequences were immediate and drastic, with a loss of \$300 million in direct production spending. Since then, the

program has survived, its funding incrementally increased to around \$50 million.

In the Texas Film Commission’s most recent report summarizing the impact of the incentive program from its inception, \$1.66 billion has been spent on film, television and video gaming in the state, creating more than 157,000 jobs, with a 511% return on investment. This sounds great until one looks at the explosion of spending and jobs in our neighboring states with much more aggressive incentives.

In just 2019, \$2.9 billion was spent on film and television productions in Georgia. In New Mexico, Netflix alone, after buying a studio in Albuquerque, spent \$150 million in state in 2019. In New Orleans, annual production spending exceeded \$1 billion by 2013 and has continued to grow. All three states were at the top of the 2020 Business Facilities ranking of state film production leaders. Texas didn’t make the list.

Granted, not all “Texas” classics are the real thing. John Wayne and Montgomery Cliff staged their epic “Red River” Chisholm Trail cattle drive in Arizona. The stunning Texas landscapes in Terrence Malick’s masterpiece, “Days of Heaven,” were actually golden hour in southwestern Alberta.

That said, we can still claim the real locations in “The Last Picture Show” and “Giant” and “Boyhood.” And there is still quality Texas story television production going on, as it was on series like “Friday Night Lights” and “The Son.”

But by not having more incentives and a more stable robust industry here, we’re too often letting others appropriate our stories and our culture, controlling them and benefiting from them. Texans should be able to tell Texas stories and see the economic benefits from doing so.

This is personal for me too. I teach in the Radio-Television-Film Department at The University of Texas at Austin, one of the top film production programs in the country and the most affordable for a diverse student body. Many of our native Texas students would prefer to stay here and grow our state’s media industries. Fewer incentives mean less business and fewer available employment opportunities after graduation.

Opponents of public incentives often talk about not having government choose winners and losers in a free market. Here in Texas, state and local government do just that with tax breaks. Increasing our film incentives guarantees jobs and dollars to Texans and will help build a lasting Texas film industry. Leaving it underfunded guarantees that many of our best and brightest will leave for employment elsewhere. It’s a choice worth paying attention to. ■