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Movies Mean Millions to Local Economy

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By Steve Sinovic, Santa Barbara News-Press, Calif.

May 21--Santa Barbara County's wine country was the lure that drew the movie producers of "Sideways" to the region about five years ago. And that film is still resulting in a positive impact to the local economy.

Today, another South Coast wonder -- the region's surfing beaches -- is attracting several film companies, which are currently scouting county locales for upcoming features with surfing themes, according to Geoff Alexander, the new Santa Barbara County Film commissioner. And if these movies get made here, he added, the local economy stands to reap millions.

One company, which is doing an IMAX travelogue, is looking for a California location, and has done preliminary scouting and camera testing for the film here. It would probably spend in the neighborhood of \$250,000 during its time on the South Coast, said Mr. Alexander, who succeeded Martine White, who held the position for five years before returning to being a location scout.

The production that looks a little more encouraging from a numbers perspective is the company bringing the life of "local surfing legend" Bobby Martinez to the screen, added Mr. Alexander. "We'd be looking at \$5 million-\$6 million in direct production spending."

He said this movie's impact on the local economy would be similar to the dollars spent by the producers of "Sideways," a comedy-drama featuring oenophiles.

"These are films crying to be made here," said Mr. Alexander, a UCSB grad who has worked a dozen years in development for independent production companies in Los Angeles. As such, he has a wide network of Hollywood contacts. .

"There is great potential to increase film production in Santa Barbara County," said Kathy Janega-Dykes, president and CEO of the Santa Barbara Conference & Visitors Bureau and Film Commission. "We have the services, venues and backdrop that this industry needs. Geoff brings fresh eyes to the task and, with his film background, connections and creativity, he can develop new opportunities and open new channels of business for us."

Mr. Alexander said his primary task is to find filmmakers who have a natural affinity for the area and engage them early. He works with "a massive database that shows the status of everything in development."

Ultimately, the local economy profits from film production in a number of ways.

"The reality is that the film industry touches every other industry here: transportation, food service, lodgings," said Mr. Alexander, who added that the commission will work trades with local hotels while pre-production teams are in town for familiarization tours. "They are the single greatest beneficiaries of production," said Mr. Alexander of the region's hotels and inns.

In 2006, the direct impact from on-location filming was \$18 million. This includes commercials, still photography for ads and fashion catalogs. The commission estimates that 2007 will generate \$17 million-\$19 million. The commission calculates the figures on permits issued.

In addition to the film productions that Mr. Alexander hopes to attract, several TV reality show producers are eyeing the area. One is about female lifeguards; the other features a dozen bachelors living with their mothers in a mansion. The working title of the latter show is called "Mamas Boys."

Mr. Alexander said 2008 will be a challenging year for filmmaking in the Golden State. Many productions came to a standstill during the protracted Writers Guild strike. Additionally, the Screen Actors Guild is also considering a strike in June.

Mr. Alexander expressed another concern relevant to his job: the lack of tax advantages offered by California to filmmakers, and hopes the legislature will enact laws creating a more film-friendly atmosphere. Forty other states currently provide tax incentives. New Mexico is one of the most active states recruiting filmmakers, rebating producers 25 percent of the costs connected to their productions. "The competition is fierce," said Mr.

Alexander, whose previous employer shot productions in New Mexico because of the tax advantages.

One of the commission's future initiatives is to attract film production to the area through "creative incubation" weekends, events that tout the advantages of on-location filmmaking. Mr. Alexander hopes to partner with the Santa Barbara International Film Festival for such an event, perhaps a "Summer Sundance" version of the festival, he added.

"I find that 90 percent of the job is just getting them here," said Mr.

Alexander of the producers. "Once they're here, they can see the possibilities."

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