

OTHER OPINIONS

NO FREE PASS
FOR HOLLYWOOD

This may not make me popular with Hollywood, but change is in order for the Louisiana movie business.

A plethora of films have come here since the filming of "Ray." Not to be left out, I've had nine roles as an extra.



GARY MICHAEL SMITH

Point of View

Then, I started hearing noises about how Louisiana is not getting its fair share of the monetary rewards of being a film mecca. The extent to which that's true became evident recently in a Times-Picayune analysis of the financial aspects of filming in Louisiana.

Everyone knows that tax credits attracted filmmakers here. But most have no idea at what cost. Sure, you have to use nectar to attract bees. But once the bees get here, the return in honey is multifold. And once you've set up a congenial home for the bees, they are more than happy to reciprocate with as much honey as their little bodies can produce. And do we just take the honey and run? No, as grateful beekeepers we give sugar syrup to the bees to replace the honey that we take.

I'm as much of a stargazer as the next person, although I've learned not to take pictures and not to ask for autographs while on the set. But after the lights have dimmed and the thrill has waned, it should be back to business. Hollywood now knows what we have to offer for locations and workforce. It might be time to end this blue-light special and start providing for our state. If millions have been spent in Louisiana since 2002, then it should start to show in improved roads, schools and other taxpayer-financed services.

How do we collect without driving off the Taylor Hackfords and Mike Hausmans? We draft legislation this April that reaches a compromise where producers remain happy and Louisiana benefits fiscally. Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ Let producers bypass brokers and sell their credits directly back at 100 percent redemption. Wouldn't you rather buy factory direct at a savings?
- ▶ Offer producers the option of choosing between tax credits for low- or no-interest loans. But these loans would come with a cap, and would apply only

to goods and services purchased in Louisiana and for hiring a certain percentage of Louisiana residents. Also, offer loan packages for construction of facilities to train locals to work as expert film crew.

- ▶ Give producers the choice of the two most important to them: sales tax breaks, tax credits, or payroll credits. But if the payroll tax credit is preferred, it should be limited to crew and local cast only — no big name/big salary megastars.

Or, tax local cast and crew salaries, but offer credits based on the ratio of local cast and crew versus imported workers, i.e., the more local employees used, the higher the tax credit.

- ▶ Limit tax credits to one per producer — either a tax for payroll or an investor tax for the total investment of the production. Also, instead of credits for transportation, hotels and restaurants, limit this to the preferred one or two.

▶ To help ensure that future productions are filmed here, offer a 100 percent investor credit paid out in the form of tax credits over five years.

- ▶ Offer foreign producers a generous tax credit applied only to local labor, but mandate that producers still pay sales taxes.

The above is just some brainstorming by someone with hopes for winning an Oscar at next year's Academy Awards for "Best Camera Swipe Background Extra" and who really wants to see Louisiana garner financial benefits commensurate with being home to a film industry.

Personally, I've done what I can to show my appreciation, from drafting the proclamation that Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed declaring March 2005 "Film and Video Industry Awareness Month" for the state of Louisiana, to developing and teaching a UNO course titled "Movie Extra 101" to help interested locals transition to work as film extras.

As my class rosters attest, lots of determined local people have made their way into the film industry already. But we need to help others with

their film aspirations. There needs to be an infrastructure in place to help carpenters, wardrobe specialists, makeup artists and hair stylists find the appropriate unions for their trades so fewer out-of-state workers are needed.

We want to be hospitable beekeepers, and the bees want a comfortable environment to do their jobs. Let's develop guidelines that allow the bees to keep making as much honey as they want, but where we can keep more of it in the hive.

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