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Louisiana Has To Decide Which Economic Road To Take

State Business

Author: Steve Sabludowsky | 5/3/2005



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There was a commercial that went something like, "I'd walk a mile for a Camel" (cigarette).

It is now time as a state to see if the time spent for a stick that only produces instant pleasure but seduces you into a cancer is the road we want to take.

Which raises the relevant question--Is there a middle-ground in this debate over tax incentives to grow a movie industry?

We know that the program is expensive and that Governor Blanco and her legislative leaders are set upon not giving the store away to grow a film industry, We also know that there is a group of movie advocates who do not want any change in the film incentive program in fear that movies will stop producing movies in the state which showcase Louisiana, and give incentives to private industries to get into the business.

Yesterday, I published a column that took the view that some tinkering should be considered if, in fact, we are presumably in a budget crunch. Such adjustments might be made by reducing the amount of incentives (percentage) or reducing the total value of the incentive program as well as or

reducing any duplicative employment taxes.

However, the risk of tampering with the fledgling industry is that numerous states are trying to attract the movie industry players and a sign of weakness would be food for fodder for those states.

Also, I have urged that we not only look at the movie industry but the entire digital media industry which snaps in nicely with the movie industry as is and in fact is the underlying infrastructure to the movie, music and other industries who want their hands on the grab.

There are other views worth noting in this battle over what I call the Digital Economy in which movies play only one role.

Here is a petition that is circulating that takes the LEGISLATORS: DO NOT TOUCH position:

Dear Louisiana Legislator,

Don't mess with my incentives!

Sincerely,

Your film industry constituent that recently moved home/bought a house/worked consistently/voted in the last election/paid taxes/doesn't want to move to L.A. (The letter ends with a petition)

On the other hand, there is a more moderate position that is more supportive of the Governor and her floor leaders. Here is a letter that was sent to me by Gary Smith who has been a Louisiana film industry advocate:

Before everyone gets on this bandwagon, think before you petition. If you think New Orleans and Louisiana can survive on a few hundred extras working for minimum wage, a handful of speaking actors from our state getting roles, some expensive hotels housing the stars, and a few grocery stores being shopped by catering and craft services, then feel free to petition against a revision to our tax incentives program.

If, on the other hand, you believe that we, as a state, need to look after our own, get more jobs for our state's population, and develop our own industry by training and using more local crews and actors, then you should side with the governor who is trying to help ensure that the Northeast and West Coast start paying their way with payroll taxes, state sales tax, etc.--money that would help us

build our own industry. The reason we've seen such an influx is because the production companies have been getting a phenomenal--and costly to Louisiana--deal since 2002. Personally, I support our governor in her efforts to look after our own citizens rather than to support New York and Hollywood production companies, actors, and union technical crews.

Don't focus only on what the film industry can do for you as an individual extra, actor, or crew member; think of how we can develop our own state-wide industry and lessen dependence on outside entities with no stake in our state's economy or infrastructure. Reminder: Governor Kathleen Blanco, Rep. Bryant Hammett, and Sen. Donald Hines are on our side. Supporting them supports our local industry.

Gary Smith

The gist of the incentive issue is that everything has its cost. There is a cost to the industry as a whole if we show any signs of weakness as a state. In a world where we did not have face the grim reaper ourselves every new fiscal year, launching incentives programs for all industries would be terrific.

We know that this state cannot be everything to everyone and that we have our personal strengths and our weaknesses. To me, the wisdom of economic growth is to get the best bang out of the dollar spent. Sometimes the bang is very tangible and can be easily measured and other times it is not. I do feel that Louisiana is on the cusp of something great but we need to attract the superstars in the respective industries to even play in the game. Moreover, we need to hear from industry experts who have connections to the outside world who can convince us as to how certain rapid deployment of resources might be to attract bigger players who can pay good paying jobs, not minimum wage with a hope.

I do know one thing for certain. All the love in the world for a state or a city will only make a martyr out of you unless you have the stroke to make reality happen. Merely signing petitions against or following the footsteps of our leaders can cause tremendous friction and get us nowhere. Having a realistic plan, getting others involved and getting results that are more cost beneficial than costly is the only road to travel. The trick is figuring out if we are walking that road which gives us a quick fix but can be very hazardous to our long-term health in the long haul.



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