



Everything New Orleans

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Algiers studio to build film industry's La. roots **Jobs, permanent infrastructure improvements and further growth should result**

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By Ronette King
Business writer

Gov. Kathleen Blanco officially unveiled plans for a \$20 million-plus Algiers movie studio on Tuesday, calling it a turning point in the state's effort to establish the permanent infrastructure needed to support its burgeoning film industry.

Sunset-Gower Studios, formerly the studio for Columbia Pictures, will build the facility. It will have five sound stages, office space, digital postproduction facilities and an outdoor set designed to look like the French Quarter.

"We are hoping this infrastructure is the first of many projects, and that movies that once went overseas will come to Louisiana," Blanco said.

Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu agreed, saying that the movie studio will allow the industry to expand here.

"Today Louisiana became the place for the film industry to not just exist, but to flourish," he said after the news conference. "Louisiana has drawn the business, now the question becomes can we handle it."

The Algiers studio already has four proposed sites on land owned by the Kern family, which operates Mardi Gras Productions, and the backing of major studio developers and film industry executives.

The project is being led by Global Innovation Partners, which owns Sunset-Gower Studios and is headed by veteran studio builders Bob Papazian and James Hirsch. They are being joined on the project by producers Jim Green and Mark Bacino and by two Louisiana locals, Albert Salzer of Crescent City Pictures and film executive Charlie French.

Hollywood has been filming in Louisiana ever since movies like "Way Down South" and "Tarzan of the Apes" were shot in the state in 1939 and 1918, respectively, French said.

But a 3-year-old state tax incentive program has stepped up the level of film production taking place in Louisiana. The program, which took effect in July 2002, offers investors a 15 percent tax credit on the cost of productions valued at \$8 million or more.

The state's movie industry has grown at a steady clip ever since. In 2002, the industry generated revenues in the state of \$3.9 million. This year, spending by the movie industry is expected to reach \$377 million, Blanco said.

Still, the state should not limit its film incentives to tax credits, Blanco said. By establishing

studios like the one proposed for Algiers, Louisiana will be better able to retain more of the industry's postproduction work, which involves tasks such as editing film and blending sound effects.

The Algiers studio was the second local movie-industry project announced this week. On Monday, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu said Threshold Entertainment of Santa Monica, Calif., wants to build a \$100 million-plus digital theme park complete with a soundstage and studio on the New Orleans riverfront.

Landrieu, whose office oversees film and tourism activities in the state, said the two projects unveiled this week will work well together.

"I think it will be very complementary," he said.

Threshold CEO Larry Kasanoff agreed.

"We are building a state-of-

the-art studio and sound stage that is wrapped inside a digital theme park," he said. "It will all be good for us. We congratulate them. If someone builds a theater and I build a restaurant (nearby), it will increase the traffic to my store . . . We want it to be successful."

Landrieu said the digital theme park proposal may encourage the Port of New Orleans and the city to work together on a riverfront project, following a cooling of relations between the two public entities in the past few months on other projects.

"The city of New Orleans has ample opportunity to land this project," he said. "If not, there are others who are interested in this project" in other parts of the state. He didn't say which cities may be alternatives, but at a news conference on Monday, he indicated Baton Rouge could also be its home. New Orleans, however, is the primary location currently under consideration, he said.

Each of the four sites being considered for the Algiers studio is either vacant or occupied by Kern-controlled Mardi Gras float dens and warehouses, said Barry Kern Jr. The Kerns would be willing to relocate their operations to make way for the studio. The sites were chosen because they represent some of the largest parcels of available acreage in New Orleans, Kern said.

Considering the number of industry employees the studio will lure to New Orleans, Kern said eventually the project will necessitate developing residential buildings along Algiers' riverfront. Kern said he is pushing quickly for construction of condominiums, though that idea remains conceptual.

While some residents in the Algiers Riverview neighborhood bordering the site complained that they were not aware of the studio project, Algiers leaders applauded the endeavor, saying it would not only add to the area's tourism business but also create jobs.

"It's a clean business and it's a quiet business and it's something that should produce of a lot of jobs," said state Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers, predicting that hundreds of jobs could be spawned by the studio.

"If we can get half of those people to live in Algiers, that'd be great," he said.

In addition, officials said, area colleges are considering adding film and television production to their curriculums to train students for jobs at the studio.

"This is a great step for economic development," said Kathy Lynn Honaker, executive director for the Algiers Economic Development Foundation. "I think we'll keep building on this and more will come."

Beryl Regas, president of the Algiers Riverview Association, criticized elected leaders for not presenting the plans to residents before Tuesday's unveiling.

"We should have been involved from the very beginning of this project," she said, adding that she knew nothing before media reports Tuesday. "We demand that we be at the table about anything going on in our community."

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