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Curtain rising on Algiers movie studio

\$20 million complex to spur film industry

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By Ronette King
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In a move that could kick Louisiana's already-burgeoning film industry up to the next level, a group of investors today will announce the construction of a \$20 million Algiers movie studio able to accommodate both feature film and TV show production.

Sunset-Gower Studios -- the new name for the former Columbia Pictures -- plans to build a studio with five soundstages, 200,000 square feet of office space, and digital postproduction facilities. The studio also will have an outdoors movie set designed to look like the French Quarter so that moviemakers can film street scenes without having to close downtown blocks.

The state-of-the-art studio promises to fill a void in Louisiana's three-year quest to develop a major motion picture film industry.

A state tax-incentive program that took effect in July 2002 offered investors a 15 percent tax credit on the cost of productions valued at \$8 million or more. Since the tax incentives have been available, a long list of films has been shot in the state, including "Ray," "Mr. 3000," "The Skeleton Key," "The Dukes of Hazzard" and "All the King's Men."

But the state has been sorely missing one prop in its efforts to lure film producers: a high-tech movie studio.

"This is the next phase: infrastructure," said Mark Smith, entertainment industry director for Louisiana.

The state can't rely on tax credits alone to attract film producers, Smith said. Louisiana also needs to make available the supporting infrastructure -- soundstages, crew services and camera equipment -- that filmmakers need to complete projects.

"What attracted us was the recent Louisiana tax credit," said Bob Papazian, CEO of Sunset-Gower. "It's attracted a lot of filmmakers to the state and, just as importantly, the production companies are going to take advantage of the tax credit to help lower the cost of production."

Papazian, a 25-year producer of TV movies, grew interested in New Orleans during a visit to the city two years ago.

"I came back and realized, 'Gee, there was a lot of potential there,' " said Papazian, who began to study the state's movie business and the opportunities here. There was no question that film and TV producers were coming to New Orleans, he said, but having a studio would make Louisiana even more of a film attraction.

Sunset-Gower, which is owned by Global Innovation Partners, an equity investor group in Hollywood, Calif., is partnering with the Kern family, best-known for its creation of elaborate Carnival floats, on the project. The studio will be built on a 15-acre parcel of land in the Algiers/Gretna area owned by the Kern family.

For producers, having a studio eliminates the uncertainty of leasing temporary office space, renting furniture and lining up equipment. With one call to the studio to find out what's available in the way of soundstages and postproduction facilities, they can spend the rest of their energy concentrating on casting and shooting, Papazian said.

"It's a service like a hotel," he said.

"One of the best aspects of this proposed development is the additional soundstage space, because that has been a limiting factor in how many productions could be working in the city on a continuous basis," said Gary Elkins, a lawyer who has worked with the tax credits and has represented production companies while working in the state.

Albert Salzer, a veteran producer and New Orleans native who once had to convert one of the city's few air-conditioned warehouses into a set for the "Big Easy" TV series, says this project will sustain the state's growing film industry.

"To take it to the next level we need to have a studio," he said. "Large theatrical features need a lot of space. (Producers) are seldom able to do a movie without some stage work. And they need the support of a construction facility, commissary, wardrobe, makeup and props: all the ancillary stuff that goes into making a full-fledged studio, not just the studio."

In another boost to the local film industry, Mayor Ray Nagin is expected to announce this week the formation of a film academy that will train workers for specialized film production jobs, Smith said.

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