

Take Two

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By Ann Johnson-Stromberg

Getting down to the business of filming in Humboldt County

EUREKA -- If you have ever watched a car commercial on television and experienced déjà vu or said to yourself, "Wow, that looks just like Humboldt County," you may be onto something.

In the past year there have been 14 productions shot in the county including three features, three commercials, two television shows and one documentary. The money spent locally on these productions is estimated to be between \$500,000 and \$600,000. Humboldt County Film Commissioner Barbara Bryant came to the position in 2001 with quite a stack of credits to her name, including being the former film liaison for the city of Hong Kong.

Bryant said she had been splitting her time between Los Angeles and Hong Kong and was looking for a good place to settle down. Being at so many film convention booths that are organized alphabetically, Bryant jokes that she just went down the H's until she found something she liked. Despite the budget crunch at the time, she took on the part-time position based out of the Humboldt County Convention and Visitors Bureau office in Eureka.

So far this year, it has been funded as a full-time position through Transient Occupancy Taxes and other cities chipping in, but Bryant said that fundraising will be necessary to keep the office open full-time after the end of the year.

Bryant estimated that more than 90 percent of chosen film locations are the result of "word of mouth" references. With every production, Humboldt County's resume builds but just as Bryant gets better at marketing the wild and lush landscape of the North Coast, so does the competition. With so many choices for locations around the globe, Humboldt County -- and California in particular -- has to become more aggressive to gain an edge in the industry that was created in our backyard.

Building film incentives

Film is widely considered "the entertainment industry" but despite its entertainment value the industry is a business. One recent example locally, of how the bottom line influences nearly all aspects of any film project, was the sci-fi television show titled Eureka but set in Vancouver, British Columbia. This is because Vancouver offers substantial incentives that have for years successfully sucked producers to the Canadian borders. Bryant said that New Zealand and Australia are among Humboldt County's stiffest competition -- mainly because of the incentives but also because of their similar rolling green hills and lush vegetation. That giant sucking sound has been getting louder and state side, legislators are catching on.

Currently there are 19 states with motion picture incentives like tax credits for in-state payroll, production rebates, vendor rebates, sales tax exemptions and interest-free loans. Some of the most generous incentives are offered in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, New Mexico and New Jersey. California is not among them.

Canada and the states that have offered incentives clearly recognize the money a film production brings with it. Bryant said that one of the best parts of the industry is that it leaves such a small footprint behind on the environment. Shoots for most productions typically last only a couple of days and because filming is typically in remote locations often the community is completely unaware a film crew ever existed. As a result, the money left behind in the process is frequently obscured.

"A lot of times production crews are buying gas, lumber or native plants for sets, hotel rooms and meals from restaurants -- but they don't wear an 'I'm filming in Humboldt County' sign," she said, adding that frequently anonymity and extreme secrecy are necessary to get a job.

In the July issue of Western City Magazine, an online magazine for local government officials throughout the California, Jude Hudson wrote a story about how films boost city coffers. Hudson found a film producer who was faced with filming in Canton, Miss. -- a community skeptical about the economic benefits the film would provide. The producer directed her crew to pay for all services in the town with \$2 bills and by the time the film wrapped -- the town was swimming in the unusual currency.

It has been several years now since the Jim Carrey film, *The Majestic*, was shot in Ferndale. Bryant said that the film brought Humboldt County approximately \$8 million. That went into local wages, equipment rentals, lodging, dry cleaning for costumes and a multitude of other services.

Growing Humboldt's film business

Bryant said that so far this year 42 location scouts have toured Humboldt County, and while 14 productions is good -- she hopes to do better.

The first question a prospective client asks when considering filming in Humboldt County is, "How's your crew base?" The crew base is a group of local community members with production experience or expertise frequently utilized in the industry. Base crew include location scouts, location managers, grips, electricians, casting companies, costume designers, production companies, set designer, greensmen (people who dress sets with native plants), stunt people and cinematographers. Other desirable items include available motor homes, a Fed Ex driver with a union chauffeur's license, teachers with a studio teaching certificate, hair and make up artists.

"Someone who has a large motor home with slide-outs can make \$300 to \$500 a day, plus mileage," she said, adding that currently she only has one on her list. Other needs include a hot truck, similar to the Mexican food trucks, but set up to cook all types of food. During the shooting of *The Majestic* Bryant said hot trucks were brought in from Southern California and as far away as Arizona.

An updated contact list for these types of resources are like gold to film commissioners. The more money a production saves by not having to bring crew members from Los Angeles -- the more attractive a location.

One advance Bryant is looking forward to is the new media center being built at Eureka High School for Access Humboldt. Sean McLaughlin, executive director for Access Humboldt, said that access to digital film production facilities will grow the local talent pool offering producers hard to find experience.

McLaughlin, a filmmaker himself, said he vividly recalls the "get away from that camera" warnings he heard when starting out. "In the film industry they don't let you touch the camera until you're an expert and how do you get to be an expert without experience," he said.

One benefit of film, McLaughlin pointed out, is the tourist draw that a highly visible production can bring to a community.

"The potential is huge," he said. "The synergy between the film and visitor industry is so high because it inherently promotes your location."

For more information on the Humboldt County Film Commission or to get on a crew base list, go to its Web site at <http://www.filmhumboldt.org>.