

Santa Clarita a lure for films Landscape, homes double for many areas; industry use growing

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BY ALEX DOBUZINSKIS

SANTA CLARITA - Drawn by its proximity to open country and its varied landscape, an increasing number of film and television productions are coming to Santa Clarita.

Film and television companies have shot in the area for years. But location shoots have been on the upswing since 2003, when the city took over permitting to streamline the process.

Santa Clarita has more than 20 soundstages, and the companies that use those soundstages often go out into the surrounding valley for location shoots.

"There's woods and lakes and mountains and deserts and everything," Shawn Ryan, executive producer of the TV show "The Unit," said of the area's varied landscape.

"So we've had episodes allegedly take place in Indonesia and Spain and all these different places, and we're really able to pull that off because of the location of Santa Clarita," Ryan said.

Santa Clarita has issued 188 permits for location shoots in the first eight months of this year, compared to the first eight months of 2003, when it issued 125 permits, said Jason Crawford, film administrator for the city. The number of permits issued in the city increases each year.

Also, the number of actual film days - meaning the combined number of days that film crews worked in the city - has increased from 373 for the first eight months of 2003 to 441 for this.

"In the past three or four years, there's been a significant increase in the amount of filming," Crawford said. "We've been positioning ourselves and marketing ourselves to attract more filming, and it's starting to pay off."

The city estimates that film and television companies bring more than \$16 million annually to local businesses for everything from hotel rooms to hardware.

Many of the local soundstages have been built within the past 15 years, but film crews used Santa Clarita for decades before that, Crawford said.

One of the factors that first drew the film industry to Hollywood in the 1920s was the Los Angeles region's varied landscape. But with the city of Los Angeles so built-out, companies have come to Santa Clarita to have quick access to open land.

"The Unit" is just one of the shows produced at a soundstage in Santa Clarita. Other shows that are made in the city include HBO's "Big Love," which is fictionally set in Salt Lake City, the HBO western series "Deadwood" and the CBS show "NCIS."

"The Unit," which was created by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright David Mamet, has been in Santa Clarita since it started production last year. The CBS show took over soundstages that had been used by the crime show "CSI."

For "NCIS," a CBS show about the Naval Criminal Investigative Service that was co-created by the man behind the show "JAG," producers search for Santa Clarita locales that look like the East Coast, because that's where the show is fictionally based.

California ranch-style homes, Spanish-style homes and palm trees are avoided - and some neighborhoods in the city look more East Coast than others.

"There are certain streets where we've probably shot every house on the street, between 'JAG' and 'NCIS' in the last two years," said Mark Horowitz, co-executive producer of "NCIS."

Despite the booming entertainment industry business in Santa Clarita, California risks losing some of its Hollywood charm to states like Louisiana and New York, said Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. Those states and Canada are offering incentives for film companies, and California needs to offer similar tax breaks, he said.

A bill to offer tax breaks to independent movie productions died this year in the California Legislature after running into political opposition. Any effort to help bigger production companies would draw even more opposition, Kyser said.

"People would say, you're favoring this one industry; why don't you favor other industries," he said. "That would be kind of difficult."

The film and television industry is the second-biggest money-generating sector of Los Angeles County's economy, after the high-tech aerospace industry.