

Op-ed: Don't spoil script for tax credits

By Claudia "Dolly" Powers
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As Gov. M. Jodi Rell issues yet another executive order to keep crucial state operations functioning through August, the state budget standoff continues. We all know different pieces of the state budget are being sliced and diced, thrown off the table only to reappear under different guises, wax and wane depending on who is sitting at the table today, or simply disappear with a whimper. Dubious whispers and frantic rumors swirl under closed doors and through cracked transoms to fly down Capitol hallways.

Throughout all this drama, I hope Connecticut does not damage our highly successful film, television and digital media tax credits.

The Film Division of the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism keeps track of the numbers: 90 films made in the state since 2006 with about \$600 million spent, including \$222 million in wages, more than 2,000 jobs, and about \$34 million to other Connecticut businesses.

Locally, homeowners, museums, colleges, hotels, restaurants and malls have benefited financially from the increased activity. Our local municipalities have also collected permit, public safety and park fees. The ever-expanding ripples spill over into new businesses such as set creators, prop suppliers, location scouts, and now completely new curricula focused on building ready-to-hire film crews right here in Connecticut. One of the first rollouts for these job-creating programs was at our own wonderful Norwalk Community College.

Blue Sky Studios ("Ice Age 3") recently moved to Greenwich, up past Purdy's Farm. Their new headquarters is amazing, filled with extraordinarily talented young artists of every description, from sketchers to sculptors to story builders to computer magicians to 3-D wizards. The crackling energy flowing from all those young folks in one space was inspiring; I left there with a huge grin on my face.

Ramped up regional activity is expanding in scope and quantity. For instance, Stamford's Rich Forum is leased to NBC for the next two years, bringing about 200 production jobs to the city as well as more than \$3 million of infrastructure investment. Additional space in other city locations has also been rented by NBC for production, taping and post-production work.

The Connecticut Film Center of Norwalk and Stamford will house production and soundstage facilities in a huge building on Stillwater Avenue, where almost 300 people will be able to work at one time. Triple Threat Television moved to Stamford from Manhattan last year bringing 25 years of valuable experience to aid in building Connecticut's exciting new entertainment industry.

To demonstrate this incentive effect on a smaller, more modest scale, I share the following true story. On a sultry day in June we zoom in on a Riverside front yard. Our homeowner, clad in grungy gardening clothes, shoves the lawn mower up and down. An unfamiliar car sweeps into the driveway and an equally unfamiliar young man emerges. He politely asks to speak to the homeowner (obviously relegating the mower to hired help status) explaining he is a movie location scout.

The young scout waxes poetic on the aspects of the vintage home and blooming gardens, offering money, house repairs and new plantings in an effort to win the location for his film. Finally, the mower patiently explains she is the local state legislator and voted just weeks ago to establish film tax incentives in Connecticut; our scout nods vigorously, stating that is exactly the reason he is standing there. Having already shattered the young man's vision of a proper Greenwich matron, she throws him an even bigger curve ball by refusing to benefit from the new law.

But there is a happy ending to this story as our scout successfully resumed his search, finding a much more receptive homeowner with another super house and yard right around the corner. Eureka! Tax credits do work and right quickly at that.

Summing it all up: These innovative tax credits are currently generating income, new jobs, taxes, support services, new state residents, real estate and consumer goods income, education and training programs, and a positive outlook in the midst of a nasty recession. And where is all this happening? Right here in our own neighborhood -- benefiting our town and surrounding municipalities, our local community college, and our out-of-work neighbors and young folks. That is surprisingly good news in a difficult year.

Call me parochial and self-serving, but I would suggest we all need to loudly remind those men and women huddled over the budget table in Hartford that this tax credit "goose" has already laid a few golden eggs in our state and promises many more. So would they please leave well enough alone and keep their hands off!

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