

New Iowa Film-Office Manager Thinking Big

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 27 January 2004 18:00

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Tom Wheeler has only been with the Iowa Film Office for a little more than three weeks, but already he has a big agenda. He envisions a fund or trust, probably a private-public partnership, that could be used to subsidize production costs for motion pictures shot or made in Iowa. And the state could provide tax incentives – such as rebating sales taxes to production companies that shoot in Iowa.

“We’re in tough competition with every other state in the area [the Midwest],” said Wheeler, who started his job as manager of the Iowa Film Office on January 5.

The competition is fierce for film production. Many feature films and television programs shoot in Canada because of subsidies and other incentives offered there, and some states have gotten into the mix. New Mexico, for example, has a film fund and tax incentives for productions that shoot there. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Wyoming have been aggressive in going after film productions.

While those governments have recognized the value of attracting movie and television production to their jurisdictions – they spend money with local merchants and frequently provide jobs for crew – others have shut down their film offices. St. Louis, for example, closed its movie bureau at the end of 2001.

Wheeler acknowledges that, at least for now, hard work and energy will have to get the job done in Iowa; the office has a budget of \$125,000, including his salary. “I’m operating on nickels and dimes,” he said. Still, “in some states, it’s a fight for the office’s existence. They haven’t closed the office” in Iowa, and have even given it a place in the state’s tourism and community-development divisions.

While he doesn’t have many resources financially, Wheeler said that he’s been “invited to eat what I can kill.”

Roughly 50 films have been at least partly shot in Iowa over the past two decades, including *Field of Dreams* and

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The Bridges of Madison County

. What's harder to quantify is how much economic impact those productions have had on the Iowa economy. Production companies, for competitive reasons, don't like to say what they spend, for one thing, and there's no distinction between a movie that spends a week in Iowa versus one that shoots for an entire month.

If Wheeler can get a handle on the economic impact of motion-picture production in the state, that information could lay the foundation for the legislative things he seeks: a film fund and tax breaks. On the issue of a film fund, he noted, the Vision Iowa and Iowa Value programs "have already helped open the door."

Wheeler grew up in Iowa and was most recently employed by Fox's animated-film division in Phoenix, working on post-production for the films *Anastasia*, *Bartok the Magnificent*, and *Titan A.E.*

His short-term goals primarily involve networking. Many different facets of motion-picture production are represented by various narrowly focused groups in the state, but there's no umbrella organization. Wheeler wants to make the Iowa Film Office that overarching organization. He describes it as "re-introducing the industry to itself."

That could help make Iowa more attractive for motion-picture production. Obviously, the primary considerations in deciding where to shoot something are the locations. But also important is the ease of doing business in a state. The easier it is to tap into a state's resources – from writers to actors to crew – the better a state looks.

"Getting the community together is the foundation," he said. "I'm adamant that everyone is involved."

But bringing productions to Iowa is just part of what he wants to do. He wants the film office to cater to "enthusiasts" – hobbyists who make short films, for example – as well as consumers. Wheeler thinks the film office could be a clearinghouse of information for consumers, with a Web site that provides reviews and movie times, for instance.

MidCoast Film & Arts Festival Entry Wins Oscar Nod

Balseros, a film that was featured in the MidCoast Film & Arts Festival this past fall, was one of five movies to get an Academy Award nomination Tuesday for Best Documentary Feature.

The film is in good company, joining the widely acclaimed *Capturing the Friedmans* and Errol Morris' *The Fog of War*, and the lesser-seen *My Architect* and *The Weather Underground*.

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Directed by Carles Bosch and José María Doménech, *Balseros* follows Cubans who rafted to the United States and their lives after they arrived.

Reader

film critic Mike Schulz called it “heartbreaking, funny, and engrossing from beginning to end.”

The movie was shown twice at the MidCoast Film & Arts Festival, which was held October 23 through 26.