

Ascension Parish jumps into movie, TV business, creates film commission to ease the way for filmmakers

The Advocate – As state legislators prepare to consider the future of the state's generous film production incentives this spring, Ascension Parish government is betting on continued interest in movie production in the Bayou State.

The Parish Council last week created a new advisory Film Commission and a new permit and fee regime for movies shot in the parish between Louisiana's production hubs of New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Parish President Tommy Martinez said the parish wants potential filmmakers to deal with one central agency, easing their ability to film in the parish.

"In the past, movie industry officials have had to gain approval through many steps and procedures with different factions," he said in a prepared statement. "This commission will consolidate those efforts and make it easier for a company to choose this parish."

Ascension joins some other Louisiana parishes that already have film commissions, including East Baton Rouge, Orleans and Pointe Coupee, observers said.

Film production in Ascension has not come close to matching what has been shot in Baton Rouge or New Orleans, but the parish is no stranger to the business either. Most recently, [A&E Networks'](#) "Bonnie and Clyde," a 2013 [miniseries](#) about the Depression-era lovers and bank-robbing duo, was shot in the parish and featured historic parts of Donaldsonville.

Parts of “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” in 2007 and “All the Kings Men” in 2005 also were shot in Ascension, among other films, the parish [Tourism Commission](#) says.

Observers outside of Ascension said a commission seems like a smart idea for a parish already attracting interest from filmmakers.

“You’ve got to have someone that can kind of guide them around and help them with the logistics of shooting in Ascension,” said Patrick Mulhearn, executive director at Celtic Studios in Baton Rouge.

He said Ascension’s proximity to Baton Rouge and New Orleans and the state’s incentives overall boost to film production in Louisiana all factor in the parish’s favor. But Mulhearn also pointed to the parish’s distinctive bayous and swamp landscapes and the parish-owned Lamar-Dixon Expo Center as draws.

Mulhearn noted, in particular, that his studio has received several inquiries from filmmakers interested in Lamar-Dixon, both for its buildings and vacant land. Filmmakers working on a production about ancient Rome were interested recently in using the center’s horse barns.

“I think it’s smart to do whatever you can to try to make it (the parish) more attractive to filmmakers,” he said.

Films shot in the parish end up putting money in local coffers, he noted. That promise of Hollywood green, along with some Tinseltown glitz, has been a long-standing selling point of the state’s film incentives.

But, in the past several years, Louisiana has suffered through repeated annual revenue shortfalls at a cost to health care, education and other primary government functions, despite, in more recent years, a strong economic growth and record private employment.

Some leaders are calling for changes in the state's [generous](#) business and industry [incentives](#), including the film tax credits. Begun in 2003, the program subsidizes 30 to 35 percent of a film's in-state costs but has taken a growing bite out of the state budget, reaching \$251 million in 2013.

When the Parish Council on Thursday unanimously approved the commission and the permit system, Martinez told members that the heads of the Donaldsonville Downtown Development District, Ascension Parish Tourist Commission and the Ascension Economic Development Corporation have all sought a commission for several years.

"They all felt like it was something that was needed here, and I agree with them, and it was something we should have done years ago," Martinez said. "It may become something that's very lucrative here."

Liza Kelso, executive director of the Baton Rouge Film Commission, said she sees her job as part marketing and part service, selling filmmakers on Baton Rouge and then helping them find what they need when they do plan to shoot.

Kelso said the commission will help filmmakers find crew members, caterers, private housing, office space and film locations. She said Baton Rouge had \$200 million in productions last year. The trade publication [MovieMaker](#) recently named Baton Rouge the top small city for filmmakers to live and work.

Kelso said she sees the potential for a Baton Rouge-New Orleans super-region in film as Ascension, Livingston and other suburban and rural parishes have a look that goes beyond more familiar "Bourbon Street"-type settings.

"Ascension has a lot to offer palette-wise. That's 'True Detective' country," Kelso said, referring to the acclaimed HBO series "True Detective," which shot parts of rural Louisiana not often seen in film.

The members of the new volunteer five-person Film Commission are the parish president, Ascension Economic Development Corporation president, Donaldsonville Downtown Development District director and heads of the parish and Gonzales tourist commissions.

Permit applications will cost \$150. The parish will charge between \$200 and \$600 in daily impact fees, depending on the type of shooting. Fees also will be charged for locations, road closures and use of parish employees. The permits also require \$1 million in insurance coverage.

Martinez said permits will be handled by parish employees. Fees collected will go to the parish's general fund, as do other kinds of permit fees.

In contrast, Baton Rouge does not charge for permits nor for the use of public buildings, Kelso said.

Celtic Studios' Mulhearn said having a fee structure is a good idea so fees don't have to be determined on the fly, but he added that the parish may find it worthwhile to be able to waive fees in the name of economic development.

The new permit ordinance does not allow fees to be waived.