



State banking on new film complex to improve on record year

By Nina Metz

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Last year was a record year for the Illinois film and television industry, according to figures released by the Illinois Film Office on Tuesday: \$161 million was spent in the state in 2010, thanks to big-budget movies such as the forthcoming "Transformers: Dark of the Moon" and the Fox television police drama "The Chicago Code."

"We just had a gangbuster year," said Betsy Steinberg, managing director of the Illinois Film Office. The numbers include 8,481 jobs directly related to film and TV projects. The previous high was \$155 million in 2007.

The announcement was made by Gov. Pat Quinn at Cinespace Chicago Film Studios, the city's newest sound stage complex. A collection of warehouse areas where productions can build and shoot on interior sets (as well as set up offices), it is located on the near Southwest Side at the former Ryerson steel campus, near Ogden and Western avenues, under the auspices of Nick Mirkopoulos, who runs several sound stages in Toronto.

An established brand that Hollywood is familiar with, the hope is that Cinespace's local outpost will be a boost for Steinberg when she pitches Chicago as a location for big-budget movies. As Chicago Film Office head Rich Moskal noted in 2009, when news of the sound stage first began percolating, "The studios love doing business with them."

If the old Ryerson plant is fully converted, the amount of space available to productions in Chicago will increase significantly. In theory, future blockbusters might consider shooting every bit of film in Chicago, now that the city has an unprecedented amount of sound stage space that can accommodate enormous sets. Most studio films that come to Chicago only shoot a portion of their scenes locally — in part, Steinberg said, because available space was limited.

The city already has a sound stage complex at Chicago Studio City, which has just under 200,000 square feet of space. Cinespace initially will be able to offer 350,000 square feet once the build-out is complete. The Starz series "Boss" (starring Kelsey Grammer as a fictional Chicago mayor) has made Cinespace its home base since last month. "Transformers" and the pilot for "The Chicago Code" also used the space last year.

The big question is whether Chicago will indeed have enough film and TV work coming up to warrant all this additional space.

Revenue trends from previous years are encouraging. Since the state's 30-percent tax credit film incentive went into effect in 2004, revenue has been rising steadily with a few exceptions. In 2003, film and TV projects brought in \$23 million. The next year that number jumped to \$76 million.

Three studio films shot in Chicago last year — in addition to "Transformers," the city was also host to "The Dilemma" and Steven Soderberg's "Contagion," starring Matt Damon (set for release in the fall).

TV work was up as well, "and frankly commercials did well last year," Steinberg said. 2010's revenue is a noticeable bounce back from 2009's \$104 million, a figure Steinberg called "commensurate with the national (economic) picture."

Five TV pilots shot here last year. "The Chicago Code" was picked up by Fox and filmed the entire season in Chicago (based out of Chicago Studio City). Showtime's Chicago-set "Shameless" filmed interiors on the West Coast, but made several trips to Chicago to shoot exteriors. "Shameless" has already been renewed for a second season; no word yet on "The Chicago Code," which airs its finale May 23.

So far in 2011, four TV pilots have come to town, including NBC's "The Playboy Club" and FX's "Powers," a police procedural based on a graphic novel in which superpowers are commonplace. (No announcements have been made about series pickups so far.)

The aforementioned "Boss" is also in town through July (Grammer appeared with Quinn Tuesday). Later this summer "Superman: Man of Steel" will touch down in Plano. And possibly more is in the works. Or, as Steinberg likes to say, "Lots of stuff circling."