



January 24, 2007

Dixon Galvez-Searle

An Eventful Tenure: Brenda Sexton Leaves the Illinois Film Office

On January 31, Brenda Sexton's tenure as head of the Illinois Film Office will come to a close. Sexton, who was appointed to the post in 2003, has spent an eventful four years directing the state film office in the midst of an ever-changing industry. While the office endured some rough patches and false starts during her tenure, it also managed to lobby for, and implement, the passage of two competitive production tax credits.

When Sexton first took the job, she was criticized as a political appointee because her ex-husband, Blair Hull, played a role in the campaign of Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Critics pointed to her lack of experience in the industry and asked how her background in commercial real estate would prepare her for the task of bringing film business to the state.

In fact, Sexton's financial background proved to be her biggest asset. The initial tax credit provided a tax credit equal to 25 percent of labor costs spent on Illinois residents. The credit was counted against Illinois tax liability, and since California studios didn't have such liability, they were forced to sell their tax credits in order to see a return. Sexton's experience brokering large financial deals came into play in implementing the initial tax credit and making it successful.

The film office also deserves credit for hiring a commercial production manager, Megan Vidis, to pitch agencies and production companies and increase commercial activity. Both tax credits have included attractive provisions for smaller budget shoots, making them applicable to commercial filmmakers and independents as well as big-budget studio projects.

That's the financial side. The film office also took some missteps in the last four years, most notably in the loss of Bob Hudgins, an industry veteran who left in 2004 and took over as head of the Texas Film Commission shortly thereafter. The office also suffered a dry spell in production in 2006, losing "Prison Break" to Texas and failing to attract any large-budget film or television projects to make up for the loss.

Fortunately, things are starting to look up, with the Vince Vaughn vehicle "Fred Claus" bringing a welcome winter production to the Chicago area and Sexton reporting a steady slew of calls from studios interested in bringing films to the state.

Meanwhile, Sexton is preparing to test the waters in Los Angeles, where she made frequent trips to court producers during her tenure at the film office. "I feel like I'm

graduating college and it's time for me to go out into the big, cruel world to see what I can do with what I've learned," she says.

While Sexton has filled the gaps in her industry knowledge, it's encouraging that Gov. Blagojevich has selected an industry veteran in Betsy Steinberg to manage the film office. Sexton was a larger-than-life figure at the Illinois Film Office, which helped the state attract business. Her successor's challenge will be to complement the up-and-down flow of studio work by cultivating strong relationships with new media and promoting local productions.