



Latest Superman movie arrives in the nick of time

By Paul Merrion

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Superman is coming to Chicago this summer, a huge boost for the city's hopes to be a moviemaking superpower.

Filming of Warner Bros. Pictures' next Superman movie will take place in the Chicago area over two or three months starting in August, industry sources tell *Crain's*, with production centered in far west suburban Plano.

In the works for years, "Superman: Man of Steel" is Warner Bros.' high-stakes, big-budget bid to revive the comic-book hero's movie franchise after "Superman Returns" belly-flopped with critics and audiences in 2006.

With an estimated budget of \$175 million, the film promises the Chicago area an economic boost like it got from last summer's filming of "Transformers 3" and the Batman movies shot here in recent years. It also keeps Chicago on the A list of production locales at a time when studio superhero Oprah Winfrey is flying away.

"It would be a tremendous windfall for us," says Richard Moskal, director of the Chicago Film Office. He can't confirm Warner Bros.' plans but says such a film "showcases a city well to audiences and draws the attention of other producers."

Less conspicuous, but no less important, is a growing number of television pilots shooting in Chicago. One of the five shot last year turned into a series, "The Chicago Code," which is up for renewal next season. Another cop drama pilot, "Cooper and Stone," and a "Mad Men"-style '60s-era show set in Chicago called "The Playboy Club" are in production here.

"Boss," an eight-episode cable drama starring Kelsey Grammer of "Frasier" as an off-kilter mayor of Chicago, will soon start production, possibly at Cinespace Chicago, a huge studio being built in several Southwest Side buildings formerly occupied by steel distributor Ryerson Inc.

But "Superman: Man of Steel" is landing amid movie industry fears that Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan's recent bid to kill the state's 30% film tax credit in five years will be kryptonite to anything from TV commercials to mega-productions.

“Once word is on the street that there's a sunset, that could all go away,” says John Crededio, owner of the area's largest film studio, Chicago Studio City on the Far West Side, where “The Chicago Code” is shot, along with “The Playboy Club” and “Cooper and Stone.”

While filming locations have not been announced, Warner recently started hiring here and making plans for a movie code-named “Autumn Frost,” according to several union and film industry sources, who confirm that “Autumn Frost” is really “Superman: Man of Steel.”

Last week, Sausalito, Calif.-based industry tipsheet *Production Weekly*, which tracks film jobs around the country, also noted that “Autumn Frost” is “Superman: Man of Steel.” A spokeswoman for Burbank, Calif.-based Warner Bros., a unit of Time Warner Inc., did not respond to requests for comment.

Movie studios often use code names to create buzz about big projects. But it's hard to keep one this big under wraps. “We hear they're taking offices in Naperville and shooting in Plano,” says Joe Crededio, a manager at Chicago Studio City and a son of its owner. “There's going to be 10 weeks of prep, 10 weeks of shooting. They're bringing in a lot of people from California.”

Plano Mayor Robert Hausler confirms via email that Warner plans to shoot a big movie in his city this summer, but “we haven't received all of the details yet. You have heard more than we have.”

Outdoor scenes would be filmed here, with interiors shot in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Warner hired Zack Snyder, one of Hollywood's hottest directors (“Dawn of the Dead,” “300” and the newly released “Sucker Punch”), to direct a screenplay co-written and co-produced by Christopher Nolan, a former Chicagoan who produced the most recent Batman movies in Chicago—“Batman Begins” and “The Dark Knight”—and now honchos “The Dark Knight Rises.” The finale of the trilogy may also do some filming in Chicago this summer but mostly is scouting locations in other cities.

Filming “The Dark Knight Rises” here is “not looking likely,” Mr. Moskal says. “The story line is evolving beyond Gotham City. But from Warner Bros.' perspective, and Chris Nolan himself told me, they were thrilled with how things went here in Chicago.”

While the plot and other details of “Superman: Man of Steel” have been kept super-secret, the first in a refreshed series would logically focus on Superman's early years in the Kansas town of Smallville, which would explain semi-rural Plano as the setting for much of the filming.

Academy Award winner Kevin Costner has signed on to play Superman's foster father, Jonathan Kent, and Diane Lane will play Martha, his mother. Cast to play

Superman/Clark Kent is relatively unknown British actor Henry Cavill, 27, who played Charles Brandon in the HBO series “The Tudors.”

Major motion pictures can have a huge impact on the local film industry and its workforce, which ranges from truckers and set artists to hairdressers and caterers. The shooting of “Transformers 3” turned downtown Chicago into a street-blocked, noisy mess last summer but generated a \$20-million impact on the local economy and created 1,200 jobs, according to city estimates.

The shooting of a TV series can have an impact that goes on for years, which is why the industry is concerned about the five-year sunset provision for the film tax credit, passed by the Illinois House and pending in the state Senate.

“If a series gets picked up, the studio would definitely want to know if the incentive is in place,” says James McAllister, assistant production manager for “The Playboy Club” pilot episode. “Having the tax credit in place makes it attractive.”