

REEL CHICAGO

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Experienced Filmmaker Betsy Steinberg to Succeed IFO Director Brenda Sexton

In a move that took the film industry by surprise, Illinois Film Office director Brenda Sexton today announced her resignation as of Jan. 31.

Her successor is Betsy Steinberg, VP/development for Towers Productions, who takes office Jan. 29 armed with 18 years experience in TV and film production.

“Brenda did a phenomenal job in four years and we were fortunate to have her,” complimented Story executive producer Mark Androw, who had been part of IFO sales missions to L.A.

“She was a great spokesman for our industry and a strong salesperson, which is what we need.”

Steinberg will be taking over at a propitious time as “phones since Jan. 2 have been ringing off hook with potential projects,” Sexton noted.

A native of St. Louis, Steinberg said her appointment “feels wonderful, exciting and can’t wait to get started.” Her basic plan for the IFO is “to advance the groundwork already laid with the latest tax credit renewal and bring more business to Illinois.”

After working as a freelance producer for Towers Productions and other clients, Steinberg joined the Towers staff in 2004. She arrived in Chicago in 1998 following a stint in Washington, D.C. where she worked with a political media consultant and producer of PBS documentaries.

Jonathan Towers, who called Steinberg “a driving force in bringing in new business,” a quality prized among film commissioners, said that she did a fabulous job on the numerous projects she worked on, “demonstrating charm, leadership, collegiality, and grace under pressure.”

How Steinberg and the Governor’s Office connected for the appointment was not clarified as no other candidates had been considered, the same situation that prevailed when Sexton was tapped.

“Betsy was the top choice of the governor,” Ross reiterated. “We were aware of her wealth of experience and we reached out to her.”

Steinberg's former Towers colleague, producer Bob Schneider, said he believes "she will be terrific" in her new job. "Betsy has extensive production experience, the intelligence, drive and most important—the people skills to represent our industry to the world."

Sexton's four years of achievement

"The last four years have been fabulous and interesting," said Sexton. "I think it was the right amount of time for me to be in that position. I'm an entrepreneur by nature and personality and I feel good about what I was able to achieve in my job."

During her tenure she helped reestablished the state as a major contender for Hollywood film dollars through aggressive salesmanship and promotion, fought the successful battle for the much needed tax incentive, increased Hollywood production and local jobs, and focused attention on the benefits of film production dollars to the state.

Ironically, Sexton's leaving was announced the same day as the legislature officially approved the 20% tax credit bill for which she vigorously and successfully lobbied last winter.

While her future plans remain nebulous, Sexton said she will spend time in L.A. She might try her hand as an executive producer "to put the money side together." That's not too far a stretch "as I've spent 20 years putting deals together."

For several of those years Sexton was an industrial property real estate broker and her lack of film experience was considered a handicap when she was appointed IFO director.

"What she lacked in film production she made up for in high visibility and connections," noted Local 476 business manager Mark Hogan. "She had a different approach, coming from the business side, but she was a hard worker and could get a lot of things done."

Sexton's final official duty will be hosting five days of Illinois-focused events at Sundance later this month, where she will introduce Steinberg to filmmakers "and give her all the help I can."

"I don't believe the State of Illinois has ever had a film commissioner quite like Brenda," said Chicago Film Office director Rich Moskal. "I'm sure she'll bring that same originality to all her future pursuits."

As Bill Zwecker said of Sexton in his Jan. 9 column: "Sexton may have stepped on a few toes, but in the end she has largely accomplished her goal of putting our state back on the moviemaking map as far as those tough studio executives in Hollywood are concerned. She deserves our thanks."