

2024 Annual Report: West Virginia Film Industry Investment Act

Introduction:

Pursuant to WV Code §11-13X-12, the West Virginia Department of Economic Development (WVDED), in consultation and coordination with the appropriate public and private entities, shall promote, foster, encourage, and monitor the development of the film industry in this state as part of its comprehensive economic development strategy for West Virginia and report recommendations for expanding the industry in the state to the Governor and the Joint Committee on Government and Finance annually on or before December 1.

The following information reflects the activity the WVDED has undertaken within the scope of the West Virginia Film Industry Investment Act (WV FILA) for calendar year 2024.

Mission: The mission of film-related activities within the WVDED is to build, grow, and support a sustainable ecosystem for the film, TV, and creative content production industry within West Virginia. This mission aims to help provide year-round employment opportunities for the state's skilled workforce and, additionally, to build a strong infrastructure of film-related business service providers, ranging from studios and soundstages to rental equipment and post-production services.

Number of staff: There are no full-time dedicated staff to the program within the WVDED. The program is administered by two staff members, both on a part-time basis - one member of the workforce development team and one member of the business attraction team. A member of the WVDED research team is now learning to manage the tax credit aspect of the film program to help with team capacity. This addition is in response to growing interest not only in the film tax credit, but other tax credit programs administered by WVDED (Tourism Development Act and the BUILD WV Act), also managed by the business attraction team member noted above.

Budget: Not specified.

Key Services:

The WVDED has implemented efforts to promote film production in West Virginia by encouraging individuals and companies to do business in West Virginia. These efforts are accomplished through the following key services:

- Administering the WV Film Industry Investment Act, an economic development tool that comes in the form of a tax credit allocation based on a percentage of a company's qualified project spend in West Virginia
- Teaming up with partners to conduct workforce trainings to generate employment opportunities for West Virginia residents

- Maintaining the Film Office web-based database for locations, crew and professional services, as well as logging and monitoring production projects that inquire.
- Connecting business prospects to West Virginia's workforce and business service providers.
- Being an active liaison between business prospects, government agencies, communities and property owners. Additionally, assisting business prospects with mapping research, logistical and technical support
- Teaming up with Film Pittsburgh's Teen Screen program through a Benedum Foundation grant to promote WV Film and film opportunities for free to West Virginia middle and high schools.
- Actively connecting West Virginia filmmakers and filmmaking groups to additional funding opportunities and resources
- Connecting interested entities and economic developers interested in film studio infrastructure investment in West Virginia to build out a film industry ecosystem for long-term success.

Workforce Training Initiatives:

Our WV Film Office has prioritized building and fostering a film industry workforce for projects filmed in West Virginia by teaming up with organizations like the West Virginia Filmmakers Guild and Film Futures Foundation. Through these partnerships, the WVDED was able to host workshops in critical occupations, including Grip and Electric, and Location Scouts and Managers.

Workshops

Collaborated to enhance West Virginia film festivals with industry training workshops:

- Topics include Grip and Electric, screenwriting, script to screen production, stunts and creating a safe set, virtual production for young filmmakers, practical effects, funding for filmmakers, breaking barriers (Appalachian women filmmakers), the business side of acting, music synching and licensing, animation, filmmaking as a career (youth), how to make a film on your phone (youth) and others.

Results as of December 2024:

- Helped host, promote, and/or sponsor over 20 workshops/presentations that helped train nearly 400 individuals across the state. Previous Film Office averaged 3-5 film industry trainings annually.
- Demonstrated WV as a viable location for TV, Film, and creative industry careers.
- The 21 workshops/presentations had a cumulative cost of just over \$27,000 for an average cost per training: \$1,286. Costs were reduced through collaboration with native WV film professionals.
- Partnered with sponsors like Marshall University, Appalachian Arts Academy, WV Filmmakers Guild, Film Futures Foundation, West Virginia Women Work, and film festivals.

Ongoing outreach efforts:

Additionally, the WVDED has had consistent outreach across the state by participating as guest speakers at West Virginia University, Marshall University, WVU Film Club, Governor's Academy for Arts, Culture and History, Arts in Our Communities conference, at regional film festivals, high schools, and other educational institutions to make students aware of, and to connect them to, film workforce opportunities in West Virginia.

An early effort to solidify workforce training has included a letter and vocal support for Marshall University to transform its video production major into the state's first BFA program in Filmmaking. Marshall started the state's first dedicated Filmmaking degree program in the Fall of 2024. That program's existence has already attracted multiple out-of-state filmmakers to shoot in West Virginia.

Business Recruitment Program:

The WVDED has taken a comprehensive approach to understand, connect with, and support the film and TV production business through the following activities since July 1, 2022:

Industry Tradeshow and Event Attendance:

- Displayed a booth at LocationsExpo during the American Film Market in Las Vegas (November 2024) in partnership with Berkeley County CVB and County Commission.
- Attendance at SXSW Film and TV Conference in Austin, Texas (March 2024).

In-state engagement:

- Film booth at WV state tourism conference. Participation in state and regional economic development and tourism conferences and business meetings.
- Regional engagement with WV businesses to educate them about their potential role in the film industry.
- Leveraging media - The office has worked with Commerce Communications to leverage media of all platforms: newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, podcasts and blog appearances to spread the word frugally for free through "earned" media. In 2024, we've racked up 35 pages of links to "good news" media stories about WV made films, music videos, and TV productions shot in West Virginia
- Focus on helping businesses understand the economic impact of bringing films to their areas.

Promotion at film festivals and premieres:

- Attendance at more than a dozen film festivals and film premieres around the state.
- Promotion, connection, and recruitment of in-state filmmakers and production companies
- Leveraging local, regional and state media to cover the film industry.

Membership and Associations:

- Renewal of membership in key film industry associations: Film USA (free membership for state film offices).
- Membership into the Indie Arts Media South a group of Southern filmmakers and industry professionals

Networking and Meetings:

- Meetings with more than 100 different productions.

- Constant networking and outreach to film industry professionals globally, particularly those from WV or with ties to West Virginia.

Infrastructure Emphasis:

- Asset mapping for infrastructure development: Identification of current studios & exploration of sites and buildings for potential transformation into studio space.
- Meetings with interested film industry companies looking to expand in West Virginia.

Funding and Support:

- Compilation and connection with additional funding sources:
 - WV venture capital funds.
 - Grants and other sources.
- Assistance and connection of WV filmmakers to additional funds for project development and growth of the film industry in West Virginia.

Film Industry Investment Act Program Applications

In 2024, the WVDED approved eligibility applications for eight productions as eligible for the tax incentives that have filmed in locations across the state. Many of these projects are now in the process of compiling expense verification reports and filling out subsequent applications required to be awarded the actual tax incentive. In total, these eight productions reflect an estimated \$9,566,000 in estimated direct production and post-production expenditures in West Virginia. A few highlights of these productions are listed below:

- *Gaslit* - TV motion picture, filmed in Marion and Monongalia counties
- *The Bad Guardian* - TV Motion picture, filmed in Marion and Monongalia counties
- *Nonverbal Communication in a Digital World* - Direct to video motion picture, filmed in Kanawha, Cabell, and Monongalia counties
- *Adam's Fire* - TV motion picture, filmed in Harrison County
- *Basic Math for Healthcare Professions* - Direct to video motion picture filmed in Kanawha, Cabell, and Monongalia counties
- *Closure* - Feature length motion picture filmed in Marshall and Ohio counties
- *Killer Dance Moms* - TV motion picture filmed in Marion and Monongalia counties
- *Self Help* - Feature length motion picture filmed in Cabell County

Project Highlights in 2024:

In addition to the projects that plan to leverage the tax incentive, many more nationally-viewed TV shows and films have utilized services provided by the WVDED. Just a few of those larger projects include:

- Kawasaki Ridge - commercial global launch and Super Bowl commercial
- HGTV's *House Hunters*
- Discovery Channel *Expeditions Unknown*
- ABC's *Shark Tank*
- ABC's *What Would You Do?*
- ABC News *Ten Million Names*
- History Channel's *American Pickers*
- Discovery Channel's *Moonshiners*

- *Barnwood Builders*
- *Fly Rod Chronicles*
- *Whitetail Frenzy*
- Independent WV-made documentaries, *Two*, *Impossible Town*, *Freeland: A White Grass Story*, *Country Brawlers* and more
- Indie features: *Paradise*, *Beat Down*, *I Feel Fine*, *Redhead*, *In the Name of Me and You*,

Recommendations for Expanding the Film Industry in West Virginia

Recommendation 1: Allocate resources to the WV Department of Economic Development for more full-time, strategic, support to the program:

To accommodate continued growth and activity within the WV film industry, there is an opportunity to allocate a budget within the WV Department of Economic Development for film workshops, industry promotion, and/or full-time personnel to focus on film to assist with the strategy, management, and oversight of the program. For the most recent context, the Film Office budget in 2016 was \$341,177 and the office previously had three staff members. Full-time or additional staffing within the WVDED would be helpful to provide capacity and more comprehensive development assistance to the industry within the state.

Recommendation 2: Conduct Assessment of Workforce and Business Service Providers

The WVDED believes an assessment of workforce and business service providers would prove beneficial in gauging the current environment, peeking into the future, and evaluating the impact of the WVDED's film industry development efforts. Marshall University's creation of a filmmaking program presents an opportunity for a partnership to conduct this type of assessment.

Developing a more vibrant environment for the film industry will have a positive effect on the state's business service providers and skilled laborers. Such assessment would quantify as well as qualify the film industry and would help answer important questions about, among other things, current workforce strength, potential workforce impact, current and potential educational opportunities, strengths and weaknesses of business service providers, and leveraging the film tax credit program for long-term economic growth. Such an assessment would require a one-time appropriation so the WVDED may commission an assessment as outlined above.

Recommendation 3: Consideration of modernizing the definition of "Qualified Project"

To enhance West Virginia's competitiveness in attracting diverse film and digital media productions, West Virginia could consider modernizing the definition of a "qualified project" under the Film Industry Investment Act. Expanding eligibility to include short films (under 40 minutes in length) and digital content, such as web series or streaming platform projects, aligns with industry trends and positions the state to attract smaller, independent creators alongside traditional productions. States like Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Georgia have successfully embraced similar updates, generating economic benefits through increased local spending and workforce engagement across both traditional and digital media sectors. By broadening what is considered a qualified project, West Virginia can encourage innovative projects that capitalize on its unique landscapes and build a sustainable, inclusive creative economy.