

Ascension courts the movies as part of LaCAEDA

By Wade McIntyre
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Martha Collins, left, Ascension Parish director of economic development, and Marquetta Cheeks, president of production at Emerald Bayou Studios in New Roads, discussed movie making in the parish last week in Gonzales. Photo by Wade McIntyre.

Martha Collins, director of the Ascension Parish Department of Economic Development, returned from the American Film Market in Los Angeles in mid-November with good news for fans of economic development - and movie buffs.

Louisiana's stellar ranking as a movie making haven is still afloat, even though New Orleans is virtually shut down and South Louisiana is crippled.

While at the world's largest motion picture trade event, Collins said she learned, "People from all over the world thought all of Louisiana was flooded, not just New Orleans."

That was a fallacy the Louisiana Capital Area Economic Development Allies Film Commission (LaCAEDA), was quick to dispel.

Members of the nine-parish commission, which includes Ascension, were happy to note that Donaldsonville was high and dry, East Baton Rouge was up and running, and the European flavor of East Feliciana can still be filmed.

"The main thing we did was tell the film industry that Louisiana is still open for them," Collins said.

The group also gleefully announced that the feature film "Instant Karma" is to be filmed in the area starting this year.

During a meeting in Gonzales with Marquetta Cheeks, president of production at Emerald Bayou Studios, an independent studio located in New Roads, Collins talked last week about the rippling economic development effect of movie making which has been jump started by the state's tax incentive program for filmmakers.

Lodging, restaurants, carpentry and lumber suppliers, caterers, and bed and breakfasts all benefit when a movie comes to the parish, Collins said.

"Some of the locals get cast as extras and set designers go to work," she said. "Sometimes there are spinoffs that you don't plan on. Actor Billy Bob Thornton saw work by Donaldsonville folk artist Alvin Batiste and asked him to do his CD cover."

She said Ascension is still looking to have some sort of backlot or soundstage, while Emerald Bayou will open a 40,000 square-foot soundstage in Pointe Coupee Parish by the end of the year for the filming of "Instant Karma."

"The idea is that each of the nine parishes is able to fill a piece of the puzzle that film makers are looking to put together," Collins said. Donaldsonville with its above ground cemetery and 50-square block historic district is a big draw for filmmakers, but Ascension is working to become a bigger piece of the puzzle by involving local labor in movie productions.

It can do that by developing electrical, carpentry and other crew needs that filmmakers require by starting training programs at local technical colleges, Collins said.

"The curriculum is already approved and being done in Pointe Coupee Parish," Collins said. "And there is another 12-week program for college credit we would like to bring in."

Cheeks, a 25-year veteran of the movie industry who got her start in Baton Rouge during filming of "The Toy" starring Richard Pryor and Jackie Gleason, agreed that the movie industry can thrive in Louisiana outside of New Orleans.

The nine LaCEADA parishes have luxury accommodations, luxurious homes for movie talent, private air strips, and different types of terrain including sand dunes in St. Helena and cliffs and hills in West Feliciana, she said.

In Ascension, there is the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center for housing trailers and trucks, and even a recording studio owned by Harold Coward.

"We found all kinds of wonderful things in Ascension," Cheeks said.