

Studios and Soundstages: Investors Move Forward

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Louisiana may have taken a hit, but the prevailing sentiment is that you can't hold her down. Before Katrina there were several studio developments in effect around southeast Louisiana and now there are even more across the state as the film industry could be one of the economic engines to kick start Louisiana.

In early August, Governor Blanco and state officials held a press conference announcing the future of a New Orleans Studio Complex. This new facility would be planned by Sunset Gower Studios in Hollywood, California, together with producers Jim Green, Mark Bacino, and Louisiana locals Albert J. Salzer, president of Crescent City Pictures, and film executive Charlie French. This multi-million dollar studio complex will be built in association with Mardi Gras Productions and Kern Studios, on existing property in Algiers near Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World. Now, after Hurricane Katrina, the project is still a go, as the area of Algiers took little damage and did not flood during the storm. Janet Viscome, assistant to Bob Papazian, CEO of Sunset Gower, recently made a statement regarding the studio's future.

"Nothing has been scrapped," she said, "and we're still moving forward and committed to keep the project in Louisiana, but our construction date will be delayed."

The proposed studio complex will consist of multiple state-of-the-art soundstages with approximately 125,000 square feet of space and will feature an authentic French Quarter back lot. The complex will also include 200,000 square feet of office space, post-production facilities, and a Film Academy planned to encourage training for specialized film production jobs.

Only 25 minutes from New Orleans, another soundstage will soon be available. On highway 51 in Laplace, Louisiana, a new civic center has been constructed. The St. John Parish Economic Development Office, together with the guidance of Sony studio executives, will be finalizing the construction of the new civic center to fit the needs of a professional soundstage at the end of this year. The Louisiana Sound Stage president, Wayne Read has been promoting the facility to many producers looking at Louisiana. "During this time of challenge and concern for the New Orleans area," said Read, "we would like to work with those involved in the film industry to help revitalize current and future projects. Our 47,000 square foot soundstage and office facility is still on target to open in December. We also have an adjacent 26 acres of open land for back lot and 4,000 feet of office space near by."

In other developments within south Louisiana, the Louisiana Area Economic Development Allies (LaCAEDA) recently traveled to the American Film Market in

Santa Monica, California where they drew up attention for possible film business. Chairman of LaCAEDA, Larry Thomas explained LaCAEDA's involvement with nine capital area parishes, including: Ascension, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge and West Feliciana. Set up just two years ago, the organization has tightly formalized, focusing on film business to boost their communities and talking with support services relocating to Baton Rouge. This area has become a popular location to film with the recent productions of *Dukes of Hazzard*, *All the King's Men*, and the most recent Warner Bros. film, *The Reaping*.

Among the delegates to promote Louisiana at this year's American Film Market was Emerald Bayou Studios, owned by Linda Thurman and Marquetta Cheeks. They are now developing a 40,000 square foot soundstage in Pointe Coupee Parish with the proposal of five films to be shot in the area.

"The soundstage structure was not damaged during the storm," said Thurman, "but will need basic improvement before productions begin. We are working to prepare the facility for the spring, and hope to progress to a full service Hollywood studio in the next two years." Together with Emerald Bayou Studios is the Louisiana Film Center, an 11-acre site selected for the construction of a backlot in East Feliciana Parish built to mimic small town America and other popular filming locales. Working with these developments, Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden recently announced that Digital Domain would help support Louisiana and produce the \$80 million film *Instant Karma* in the bayou region. The half-animated and live action film could be one of the first projects to use the proposed soundstage and backlot in East Feliciana Parish. Digital Domain is the Oscar-winning special effects team responsible for movies such as *Titanic* and *Apollo 13*.