

# A Survey of Local Film & Video Offices

Prepared for the Sarasota County Film & Video Task Force  
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During May, 2006, 12 local film and video offices were interviewed by phone to obtain information about their structure, budget, and operations. Four of these offices were in Florida, while eight were in other locations across the nation. All but one location had staff of one to two people. A complete listing of offices is found in the back of this report.

## Summary of Findings:

- Film & video offices were housed in a variety of organizations, yet were very consistent in terms of operations and services offered.
- Budgets were very consistent for one and two person offices, ranging from \$120,000 to \$150,000 for single person offices, and up to \$225,000 for two-person operations.
- Since most offices operated within another agency and reported to the parent organization's board, many offices had a film & video advisory committee to help direct their efforts.
- All offices got the majority of their film & video work from activities other than feature films. With the growth of hundred of cable TV channels, many regions were experiencing steady work in TV programming and commercials.
- The average direct economic impact (measured from permitted projects) was typically \$3-10 million per year. Offices that tracked local and non-permitted productions reported between \$50-130 million per year of economic impact.
- About half the film commissioners interviewed did not have industry experience. When asked about the importance of industry experience, all offices thought it was "a nice to have, not a need to have." People, problem-solving and marketing skills were equally important, especially working with community leaders and government officials.
- Relationships with the state offices varied. However, offices in Florida reported that Film Florida was very helpful and an essential partner to their regional operation.
- When asked what a new or expanding office should focus on during its first few years, the answers were similar:
  - *Know what you have:* Inventory your assets, determine your markets and develop a strategy.

- *Connect to the state film office & nearby local offices* to leverage resources and make connections.
- *Get the community on board:* Get your local crew, elected and agency officials, and the general public to be film friendly.
- *Don't short-change your foundation pieces:* A professional location library and website is a must.

## **Part I: Organizational Structure**

### **Years in Operations**

Most film offices had been in operation for over seven years, with many in operation for over ten years. Sedona, Arizona was the newest office interviewed with an executive director in place just under one year.

### **Jurisdiction**

About 60% of the offices interviewed covered a one county region, while Wilmington covered an 11 county region, Western North Carolina covered 23 counties, and Rochester Finger Lakes covered 16 counties. Savannah, Georgia and Sedona, Arizona were city-based film offices.

### **Parent Organization**

Film & video offices are housed in a variety of organizations. About half of the film offices operated within a tourism or CVB organization in their area. Some CVB-based operations (e.g. Tampa Bay, Florida Keys, Rochester/Finger Lakes) were non-profits, while St. Petersburg-Clearwater, Park City and Savannah were offices operating within a government agency. Western North Carolina and Monterey County were housed within economic development organizations. Sedona was a part of the Chamber of Commerce (which had both economic development and tourism functions), while Wilmington and Palm Beach County were independent offices not operating within another organization or government agency.

### **Board Functions**

Most offices had an official reporting function to the parent organization board. For instance, if the office was housed within a CVB agency then the Film Commissioner reported to the CVB board.

Even when the official reporting board was that of the parent organization, most offices had a film & video advisory committee or council. These councils varied in size from 15 to 30 people representing all aspects of their film & video industry as well as some support organizations. Some advisory boards had committees representing the various sub-sectors within the industry (e.g. film, commercial, television), while others were project oriented. These advisory groups appeared to have similar overall functions.

- Providing direction and input to local office operations. [Example: Suggesting ways to streamline permit process.]
- Providing education and community support. [Example: Meeting with elected officials to help them understand the unique needs of the film & video industry.]

- Identifying growth opportunities. [Example: Working with specific leads or location scouts to help promote the region.]

### **Staffing**

Most offices interviewed had 1-2 employees. The functions in each office were divided into two main categories. Those offices with one staff person did both functions, while those with two staff tended to separate function among the following responsibilities:

Film & Video Commissioner: This person was the “face” for film & video in the region. They developed marketing strategies and attended trade missions and industry shows to promote the region. They responded to leads, managed community relations, and provided information to local governments and other related groups.

Film & Video Coordinator: This person typically interfaced with productions to gather necessary permits, provided local support during production, assisted the commissioner in responding to leads, and maintained the location library, crew guide, and website.

### **Background & Experience of the Film Commissioner and Staff**

The interviews asked for opinions about the preferred background or experience of a film commissioner: whether or not direct industry experience is necessary, and to what extent are other skills needed. Not surprising, there continues to be a mixed opinion on the importance of direct industry experience. Some noted it was extremely helpful, but few referred to industry experience as a must. Equally important were great people and marketing skills along with a strong customer service focus: *“being extremely responsive to the industry and knowing what you have to sell.”*

Several offices where staff had industry experience said they had to adjust to the pace and needs of the government agencies involved. Therefore, it was noted that industry experience alone did not qualify a person, the personality and temperament to work with government processes was also needed. The need for “political savvy” was often used in interview responses.

Many offices noted the importance of understanding the business aspects of the industry, especially as incentives play a key role in the final costs of production. Equally important was articulating the local economic benefit and connecting film & video to the overall economic strategy of the area.

*“The best skill your film commissioner can have is outstanding customer service—knowing what the industry needs, what the local community needs and what the funding partners expect. It’s a balancing act between all of these.”*

### **Budget**

Ten of the twelve offices provided budget information. Budgets ranged from \$120,000 - \$150,000 for one person offices, and \$130,000 to \$225,000 per year for two person offices. Other operations including office overhead, service contracts for functions such as website development, etc. typically accounted for less than 15% of the budget. Many offices had in-

kind contributions from their parent organization of rent, administrative support, etc. that were not included in budget figures.

Staffing costs: On average 40-65% of the budget went to salary and benefits. When asked about the level of salary required for today's film offices, interviews noted that the current salary range for film commissioners ranged from the mid \$40,000 to mid \$60,000 depending on experience, size of operation, and location. Coordinator or assistant positions ranged from the high \$20,000 to mid \$30,000.

Marketing costs: About 20-50% of the budget went to marketing functions including trade missions to major markets, travel to and exhibition costs of industry shows, development of marketing materials and location libraries, and development and upkeep of the website. Some organizations, especially those within tourism or CVB agencies could stretch their budget by using the web and marketing materials of the parent organization. Offices with strong state operations (like those in Florida) shared costs with their state offices, while other groups developed joint marketing strategies with neighboring local offices. Only a few offices advertised in industry trade publications.

#### **Additional Budget Needs:**

To assess what aspects of film & video operations had effective ROI or were under-funded, each office was asked what it would do with 20% more budget. Almost all responded that they would use additional budget to increase direct promotional activities including more trade missions to key markets (e.g. "trips to Los Angeles"), and updating and expanding their locations and digital library, including investing in Reel-Scouts for their location library. (Reel-Scouts is a company that provides film offices with a searchable digital library and client management system that is available 24/7.) A few offices noted they would run paid advertisements in industry publications.

*"When you are a small office you still need to look professional--the best investment we made was to use Reel-Scouts for our location library, it's like an extension of our staff"*

*"We don't spend money on paid advertisement, we focus on direct promotional activities-- You just can't underestimate the power of face to face contacts with key industry players"*

#### **Funding Sources:**

Funding for film & video operations came from several sources. Those within CVBs typically received the majority of their funding through a bed tax or tourism tax, with some funding as a percent of the overall membership revenue. Those that were government agencies received a direct allocation from city/county budgets. Groups that were a part of economic development organizations typically received direct city and county allocations as well as a percent of their membership revenue. A few organization received grant funding for specific programs, mostly educational in nature.

Budgets for most organizations were yearly allocations from either the parent organization or the associated local governments. Wilmington has a five-year contract with its jurisdictions, helping to stabilize its budget.

**Summary of Film & Video Office Organizational Structure & Budget**

	Jurisdiction	Type of Entity	Staff	Annual Budget Range	Funding Source
<b>Tampa Bay</b>	County	Office within nonprofit CVB	2 FTE (1 FTE until this year)	\$125,000-150,000	Tourism (bed) tax
<b>St Petersburg-Clearwater</b>	County	Office within County Gov.	2 FTE	\$175,000-200,000	Tourism (bed) tax
<b>Florida Keys</b>	County	Department within nonprofit CVB	1 FTE	\$100,000-125,000	Tourism (bed) tax
<b>Palm Beach County</b>	County	Independent Agency	8 FTE	\$870,000+	\$705,000 from Bed Tax; \$166,000 from EDC
<b>Savannah, GA</b>	City & surrounding area	City Government Office	1 Full Time 1 Part Time	\$125,000-150,000	City Budget
<b>Wilmington, NC</b>	Regional: 11 counties	Independent Agency	2 FTE	\$200,000-225,000	Mix of city and county budgets, EDC allocation
<b>Western NC</b>	Regional: 22 counties	Office within regional EDC	1 FTE	\$150,000-175,000	EDC funds
<b>Rochester/Finger Lakes, NY</b>	Regional: 16 counties	Office within regional CVB	2 FTE	\$130,000	Tourism (bed) tax
<b>Austin, TX</b>	Regional: 7 counties	Office within regional CVB	1 Full Time 2 Part Time	\$110,000*	CVB budget/ Tourism tax
<b>Sedona, AZ</b>	City & surrounding area	Office within the Chamber	1 FTE	\$125,000-150,000	City Budget
<b>Park City, UT</b>	County	Office within County Gov. CVB	1 FTE	N/A	County Budget
<b>Monterey, CA</b>	County	Office within County EDC	1 Full Time 2 Part Time	\$175,000-200,000	½ from County Budget; ½ from Grants

\* CVB provides additional funding for some part time staffing and some marketing functions

**Part II: Types of Film & Video Activity & Its Economic Impact**

Film & video activity comes in all shapes and sizes: feature films, independent films, TV films, TV series, cable TV shows (e.g. episodes on HGTV, Food Network, Fit TV), infomercials, commercials, still shot/print ads and catalogs, etc. **Most regions reported that the majority**

**of their direct economic impact came from revenues produced by industry segments other than feature films.** Regions tend to have one or two “bread & butter” activities along with an array of less frequent industry activity. Areas like Tampa Bay and St. Petersburg-Clearwater had significant activity in infomercials and commercials. Park City Utah attracted a lot of independent films, while Wilmington, NC has TV series and some feature film activity. All locations noted a significant drop in large feature film production during the past five to seven years as other countries and states offer extremely competitive incentives.

*“Make sure to tell your local officials that the majority of film and video work is not big films, it’s all the other stuff that isn’t as sexy. Say it again, and again and again.”*

*“Don’t count on feature films as your primary source of revenue, ours is less than 10% and we’ve been at it for a long time.”*

*“With Canada and a handful of states offering extremely attractive incentives, we’ve found the feature film activity is less and less...however with the hundreds of cable TV channels needing programming, we are seeing a big increase in that market.”*

### **Economic Development Focus**

Regardless if the parent organization was tourism, government or economic development based, the film & video office had a clear economic development element (some more than others). Most offices, if not located within an economic development agency, had a strong working relationship with the economic development agency.

*“If you are just focused on heads in beds, you will not be a successful film office. There are many more benefits than that.”*

One interview summarized the comments of many others in a very concise manner. They noted that each time a commercial or catalog is produced, or a TV show or feature film is shot in a region, four main benefits occur:

- *Immediate local revenues:* Expenditures by production companies on hotel, food, local crew, business services, etc.
- *Ongoing tourism and destination marketing:* Promoting the region for tourism and destination events through highly visible location shots.
- *Business Development:* There is need for and use of local equipment and services by outside production. So as outside production increases, the stability and revenues of local businesses will also tend to increase
- *Workforce Development:* Outside productions also use local talent and crew. Therefore, increases in production days will increase the total wages and employment level of local talent and crew.

### **The Balance Between Local Industry And Outside Production**

Many of those interviewed noted a “full circle affect” that occurred as a region gained more production days. The more production (from outside or local companies), the more stable and better quality local businesses and crew. In turn, this increased quality of local business and

crew becomes became an attractor for marketing the region for additional work. As one interview put it, it's nice to get the point where you can say...*"we have great locations AND great crews"*

**Measured Economic Impact**

The local economic impact of the film and video industry is typically measured by the direct expenditures of productions during their stay in a certain region. Since it is difficult to track all production that occurs in an area, most regions report only the direct expenditures of those productions that required permits. Only Palm Beach County and Wilmington tracks economic impact beyond permitted jobs. Therefore, the economic impact numbers below represent a subset of the total economic impact in a region.

On average, the direct economic expenditure for offices reporting only permitted production ranged between \$2-10 million per year. For regions reporting more than permitted productions the economic impact ranged from \$50 to \$130 million per year.

**Summary of Film & Video Activity & Corresponding Economic Impact**

	<b>"Bread &amp; Butter" Projects</b>	<b>Feature Film Activity</b>	<b>Economic Impact</b>
<b>Tampa Bay</b>	Mostly commercial & cable TV programming	Little feature film activity	\$4-6 m per year on permitted projects
<b>St Petersburg-Clearwater</b>	Infomercials/commercials, cable TV programming; some independent films	Little feature film activity	\$2-5 m per year for permitted projects
<b>Florida Keys</b>	Commercial and still shot, cable TV programming	Mostly location shots for Features shot in Miami	\$3 m per year for permitted projects
<b>Palm Beach County</b>	TV programming	Features are less than 10%	\$100-130 m per year both permitted & local production
<b>Savannah, GA</b>	Commercials, independent films, catalog	From 1995-2000 about 1-2 features each year, very little activity since 2000	\$1.5-22 m per year
<b>Wilmington, NC</b>	TV series, some features	Moderate level of feature film activity	\$50 m per year for permitted and local production
<b>Western NC</b>	Independent films, print/catalog	Some location shots for features, very little features base in region	\$3-5 m per year for permitted projects
<b>Rochester/Finger Lakes, NY</b>	Commercials and independent films	Location shots for features filmed in NYC	\$5-10 m per year mostly permitted projects
<b>Austin, TX</b>	Feature Films and TV programming	10-12 features per year with budgets over \$1M	\$100m per year for tracked productions
<b>Sedona, AZ</b>	Cable TV programming, commercials and print ads	Little feature film activity	\$3 m per year for permitted projects
<b>Park City, UT</b>	Independent films	N/A	N/A
<b>Monterey, CA</b>	Commercials, still shots and cable TV programming	Little feature film activity	\$3 m per year for permitted projects

### Part III: Roles & Responsibilities of Film & Video Offices

Each film & video office noted the same type of activities, however the allocation of time varied according to staffing level and budget. In addition to basic administration functions (budgeting, reporting, etc.) the key activities are listed below.

Activity	Avg. Distribution of Time	Constraint Factors
Proactively marketing & promoting the area, (trade shows, trips, marketing materials and incentives/legislation)	20-40%	Marketing and travel budget; Activity level of state film office (do they have budget to co-market)
Responding to leads and scouting locations	20-35%	Result of marketing efforts, role of state film office in generating leads, work with nearby film offices
Coordinating productions & assisting with permits	20-35%; higher during a large production or unusual volume of work	The types and complexity of permits within local jurisdictions, the film friendly attitude of government agencies
Maintaining location library, crew guide, website, etc.	10-20%	Overall budget, available technology, and ability to use outside services for website or location library (e.g. Reel Scouts)
Community relations, public presentations, work with local elected officials and agency staff, work with local film festivals.	5-15%	Often done in "leftover" time, but critical for local relationships and being streamlining the red tape.

#### Key Activities For New & Expanding Offices

Those interviewed were asked what would be their top deliverables when starting or expanding a film office. Again, the responses were very consistent.

- *Know what you have:* Inventory your assets and determine what you have to "sell". Develop a strategy that utilizes your local assets and connects to state resources.
- *Connect to the state office & nearby local offices:* Develop strong working relationship with the state film office and any neighboring film offices to get you started. Utilize AFCI resources.
- *Get the community on board:* Before you start to market to the outside world, make sure the community is on board. Your local crew and companies need to know the vision, the elected and agency officials need to be on board with a film friendly attitude, the general public needs to be aware of the local benefits of this industry.
- *Look and act professional:* Develop the most professional location library and website possible.

*“The most important thing you can do is to know what you have to sell and what aspects of the industry need you the most.”*

*“Selling your region means that you can quickly and professional produce the images people are looking for: your investment in a location library is the underpinning of the office.*

*“More and more I make presentations to local groups and spend time with local officials. While it is hard to find this time, it is time well spent.”*

### **Working with State & Local Film Offices**

The relationship to the state film office was viewed as a critical element for an effective office. While state offices took generated leads for regions, many state offices worked with local offices to share in marketing expenses at industry trade shows and expos. Some state offices had training programs for local film offices. State offices also took the lead in developing incentive programs and tracking legislative issues.

Most offices interviewed worked with neighboring offices on joint marketing programs, including the production of crew guides which often covered multiple counties. There was a growing awareness about the regional nature of the industry that often crossed county lines. Several offices noted that if they were to start over, they would recommend a regional office covering several counties versus multiple offices, each with its own county boundaries and processes. Some offices with multiple municipalities or counties have worked to provide consistency in permit requirements and other local statutes that affect the film & video industry.

### **Other Key Partners**

AFCI (Association of Film Commissioners International) is the primary industry organization. AFCI sponsors key industry events, provides information on locations throughout the world, provides education for film offices, and publishes Locations Magazine. Currently, Sarasota is not a member of AFCI.

### **Connections with Film Festivals**

Almost all locations interviewed had film festivals. In fact, many locations had multiple festivals. There appeared to be a clear distinction between film festivals that drew mainly local attendance, and those where outside directors, actors and other industry representatives attended. There was also a distinction between festivals that promoted films with or produced by local talent, and those that were theme driven (e.g. Asian Film Festival) where there was little connection to local industry and almost no attendance by outside industry professionals. These distinctions appeared to be critical in determining the level of involvement by the film and video office. Film offices had the greatest connection to film festivals when they could market the region to outside industry professionals, or help the local industry build its reputation in larger markets. During these types of festivals, film and video office typically

- Conduct a tour for outside directors and actors to promote the region for future work.
- Host receptions to connect local industry to visiting industry attendees.
- Set up one-on-one meetings with directors and other key industry representatives.

There were many words of warning from film offices concerning the relationship to film festivals. Since festivals are very time consuming to organize and hold, the involvement the film & video office needs to be very clear, especially for offices with small staff. With the limited time and budgets of most film and video offices, a specific connection to how the festival would advance the local industry or promote the region as a location for future work was required.

### **Parting Words of Wisdom**

*“Don’t build your film office on attracting feature films. It’s great if you get one, but the competition is fierce and if you don’t have the financial incentives and depth of crew and support businesses, all the pretty locations won’t be enough.”*

*“Great location and great crews are a plus, but so is the attitude of the local community, especially the government officials and agencies you work with. If you have a lot of red tape and the public doesn’t want the industry you’ll be known as a hard place to do business...And a reputation lasts a long time!”*

*“Know your local contacts well, because there will always be at least one issue you will need quickly resolved.”*

*“There is a pull between attracting outside work and supporting the local F&V industry. With a very small office it is hard to both, you will need to clearly identify priorities in both worlds and try very hard to stick to it...good luck.”*

## **Film & Video Offices Interviewed**

### Florida Offices:

Florida Keys  
Palm Beach County  
St. Petersburg-Clearwater Area  
Tampa Bay

### Other Offices

Austin, Texas  
Monterey County, California  
Park City, Utah  
Rochester/Finger Lakes, New York  
Savannah, Georgia  
Sedona, Arizona  
Western North Carolina  
Wilmington, NC