

INCREASING FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION FOR LOCAL ECONOMIC PROSPERITY Policy Considerations for the Town of Okotoks

Issue

Southern Alberta has a growing film and television production industry, and the Town of Okotoks is a prime location for new projects in the region. The Town of Okotoks has an opportunity to make a name for itself as a prime destination with regulations seen as friendly to new initiatives.

Background

Film and television production has delivered consistently positive economic impacts for local economies. While there is plenty of data on provincial impacts of film and television production in a region, there is relatively little on the municipal economic impacts. Considering that the Alberta Film and Television Tax Credit rewards local spending it can be reasonably assumed that many medium and large-scale projects will spend as much as they can in the jurisdiction in which they're filming to take advantage of this credit. This is evidenced by both data and the anecdotal evidence heard by Okotoks business owners during and after the recent filming of *Ghostbusters* and *The Last of Us*.

A study was commissioned by the Canadian Media Producers Association of Heartland, a television series filmed in High River and throughout the region. Heartland has just been renewed for a 16th season (the longest running TV drama in Canadian history), and the study was conducted by MNP LLP in October 2017 using data from season nine. In season nine alone, the production employed 121 vendors from High River directly and they also worked with 1,290 vendors throughout Alberta. Importantly, tax revenues for the first ten seasons for the local municipalities is estimated at \$3.5 million.

Other projects, *Tin Star* and *Let Him Go*, also have reported economic impacts. The two productions have spent more than \$4.5 in direct spending between the 6 municipalities they've filmed in. *Ghostbusters*, which was filmed in Okotoks backyard, booked 14,627 hotel rooms which resulted in \$4.35 million in accommodation revenues. These are just a few examples of economic impacts of local productions.

Content streamers such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, and others have been increasingly the primary mediums for individuals to consume television series and movies. In fact, some streaming services have been the mechanisms for new movie releases when movie theatres were unable to open. With Netflix, Disney, and Comcast set to spend an estimated \$230 billion in the development of original content ([source](#)), the economic opportunities that arise for local municipalities is undeniable.

Analysis

Currently, there is no clear policy or procedure for productions to follow should they be interested in working in Okotoks. Bill Kerr, the Locations Manager for Hudson explained, “My greatest struggle putting [Hudson] together was finding the right person to talk to, which is a problem with other small towns and MDs so that’s not unique to Okotoks.” He also expressed concern with how a larger production might deal with this type of disruption.

This can result in unnecessary delays and overlooked locations that might be perfect for a project. Mohammed Qazzaz, the location manager for *The Last of Us*, *Land*, and *Tribal* said, “the town needs to assemble a team that could bring those hidden gems and benefits [...] to the forefront, and not be subtle about it either. You need a sexy location photo library and a sort of brochure that would include all that stuff. It’s not known as a go to filming destination, but it so easily could be.” He further stated, “No red tape is a huge thing for us as you know... perhaps that could be the incentive to shoot in Okotoks?”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both Bill Kerr and Mohammed Quazzaz raved about Okotoks as a location for previous and future projects. Both individuals also spoke positively of their interactions with town administration. Feelings echoed by Scott Lepp, the producer of *Tribal*, *Heartland*, *Ice Blue*, and *Hudson*. Scott describes Okotoks as “very suitable for film production”. He explains, “We have all of the amenities required to service larger productions and we have these truly great, unearthed locations to explore. Every new project I’m a part of, I pitch Okotoks for that reason.”

As we have evidence that productions are interested in filming in Okotoks, there needs to be a concerted effort to solve the problems that previous productions have faced. Scott Lepp sums up a potential solution,

“the feedback we continually get from scouts is that productions always want to return to what they know, which tends to be outside the city and High River. In my opinion, outside of a film policy, the way to approach this is make the film policy very public and include with it the locations, amenities and logistical solutions that the town can offer. [...] If we know what can be made available, that makes a huge impact. Plus, the town will need to have the ability to react to the immediate nature of the business. I’m not saying that productions need to be able to show up one day and film the next, but it does sometimes happen. So, having someone, or an organization available to facilitate these types of things, without having to go through council etc, is key.”

Recommendation

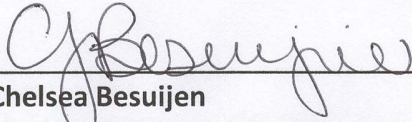
The Okotoks & District Chamber of Commerce recommends the Town of Okotoks:

1. Immediately strike a taskforce consisting of economic stakeholders, including representatives from the Town of Okotoks, Okotoks Film Society, and the Okotoks & District Chamber of Commerce, to work together on crafting a policy for the Town of Okotoks to work with future film production.

Date Approved:

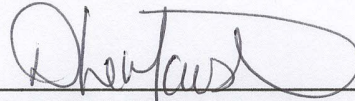
November 8, 2022

Motion made by Chamber Director James Lee and seconded by Chamber Director Adam Stepa.
All directors were in favour.



Chelsea Besuijen

Okotoks & District Chamber of Commerce
President



Dawn LeMaistre

Okotoks & District Chamber of Commerce
Executive Director