



Bennington Banner

(/)



SUBSCRIBE

Try four weeks for 99 cents

Shooting for incentives ITVFest, lawmakers making case for state film funds



(/uploads/original/20180914-182121-Weds8-T5_04970.jpg)

Philip Gilpin addresses the audience at the 2016 FreshTracks Road Pitch. Gilpin, and the directors and producers he has been working with, believe that Vermont needs a tax incentive program in order to compete with other states.

BANNER FILE PHOTO

Posted Friday, September 14, 2018 6:21 pm

By Greg Sukiennik, Manchester Journal

MANCHESTER — It's about a month until ITVFest stages its second festival since moving to Manchester. But ITVFest the organization is beginning to evolve into another role — that of advocate for growing the television and film industry in Vermont.

Preparations are well underway for ITVFest to host to more than 1,000 television writers, actors, showrunners and programming decision makers the weekend of Oct. 10-14. The Television Academy — the people who give out the Emmy awards — has signed on as a presenting sponsor. Bruce Gersh, an executive vice president at Meredith Corp. with responsibility for magazines *People*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *People en Espanol*, will deliver the keynote address.

Executive director Philip Gilpin Jr. is excited about all of that, and says the Academy's participation has opened enough industry doors that this year's festival will serve as a true marketplace for programming. The festival will set up about 500 meetings between creators and programmers, he said.

And he's hoping more locals volunteer, and come out to enjoy the screenings and events.

But as the festival approaches, Gilpin wants to maintain focus on his organization's growing role, through its partnership in the Vermont Production Council, in building the industry in Vermont. It's increasingly found him in Montpelier lobbying for tax incentives that could help the Green Mountain State compete with its neighbors.

"It's about getting people to start thinking institutionally about what we do and who we are. That's 100 percent of my focus and effort," he said.

Green of a different sort

Gilpin, and the directors and producers he has been working with, continue to make the point that Vermont, for all its breathtaking landscapes and helpful residents, needs a tax incentive program of some sort in order to compete with other states.

This past legislative session, lawmakers including Rep. Brian Keefe (R-Manchester) and Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan (D-Dorset) worked on a bill that would have financed a film incentive program and established a college accreditation program for television and film production skills. The bill, introduced by Keefe in the House and helped through the Commerce committee by Sullivan, passed in the House. But it lost a key element in conference committee with the state Senate: funding, which was the point of the exercise.

"There's history with tax credit programs. People just weren't ready to go that far," Keefe said of the effort. He said he'll try again in the next term.

During his Sept. 27 visit to Bennington County, Gov. Phil Scott was asked by Carolyn Blitz, a member of the Vermont Production Council and the president of Mountain Media LLC., about the possibility of an incentive program for film and TV, one that might also grow the industry in the state, attract young professionals and provide workplace training.

Scott didn't commit but seemed enthused. "It's not just making a movie here — it also promotes us and markets us. It's a win-win," he said.

But what's the return on investment for a film or TV project?

Writer and producer Billy Hanson, who has previous connections to Gilpin and ITVFest through his participation in the festival, is looking for a location to film "No Place To Fall," and wants to shoot in Vermont. The preliminary budget for that film, he said, is just under \$900,000, and "of that budget, we estimate that somewhere around \$510,000 would be spent in Vermont, on crew, lodging, locations, etc."

Incentives matter because they're a significant part of the financing process for film projects, said Hanson, whose resume includes post-production work on "Victorious" and "iCarly."

"While gathering funds to make a film, the numbers are often too high for investors to sign on without

showing places to keep costs down," Hanson said. "So without the millions already saved with tax incentives or rebates, many, maybe even most productions wouldn't even exist. So for the most part, the idea of incentives or rebates are more useful in getting that ever-elusive green light than maximizing profits."

Furthermore, with film, TV and web content growing, so is the diversity of people pursuing those dreams, Hanson said.

"The landscape of productions is more vast than it's ever been, and the majority of people making film, TV and web content are struggling to even get things moving," he said. "Independent productions like "No Place To Fall" have trouble getting off the ground at all without incentives or help given by a community."

A better deal?

Sarah Donnelly, a producer of "Stormchaser," which shot in the Northshire and in St. Albans over the summer, said it would have made financial sense to shoot in upstate New York instead, thanks to its industry tax incentive program.

Since nearly three-fourths of the film's budget was allocated to technical and trade expenses — known as "below the line" in the industry — a large portion of the budget would have qualified for at least a 30 percent fully refundable tax credit from New York, Donnelly said.

"When you're an independent film working with a tight budget and relying upon a tremendous amount of professional favors, every penny counts. This tax credit would have enabled us to recuperate or reinvest at least \$60,000 of the film's budget, which is less than our film's direct spend in Vermont during production," she said.

Donnelly estimated "Stormchaser" spent \$70,000 in Vermont. The production spent weeks in the Northshire, staying at the Arlington Inn and relying upon caterer Debbie Sheldon to keep the crew fed.

"For those who may not understand why incentivizing film at the state level is important or how it benefits the state, to put it plainly, we spend money," said Donnelly, who still wants to bring a bigger-budget project here if the funding can be found. "We support a myriad of local businesses, we employ local people, and offer other long-term ancillary benefits such as increasing state tourism appeal and the potential for further film opportunities, thus continuing the positive economic impact.

"Film is a rare business where the plan is to actually spend 100 percent of our capital," she said.

Gilpin said there's other productions waiting on Vermont "if we can find the support," he said. "It's scaling up into funding amounts that the industry operates at, at a normal level."

"No Place To Fall" could potentially spend thousands of dollars in Vermont between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Gilpin said. "New York State is willing to give them \$400,000 in tax rebates based off their budget. For us to compete, we have to raise \$400,000 in cash."