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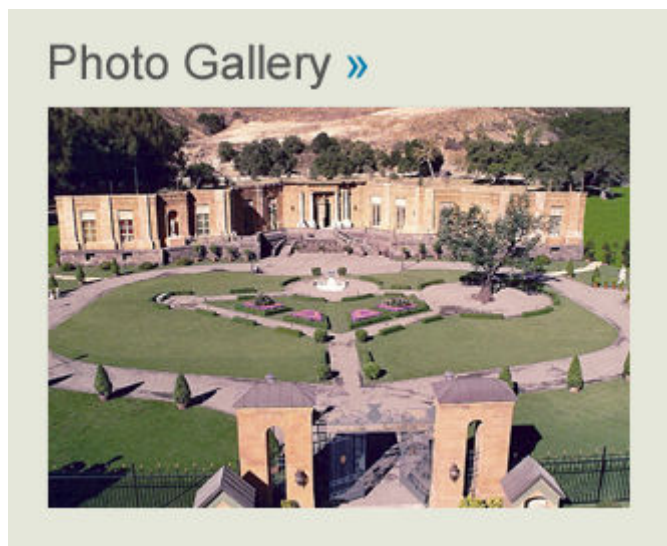
ENTERTAINMENT

Company Town

THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE SHOW

Disney plans new soundstage and production facility in Santa Clarita Valley [Updated]

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Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas, Disney
Los Angeles Times

The Walt Disney Co. today filed plans to build a sprawling soundstage and production complex on the northwest corner of its Golden Oak Ranch in the Santa Clarita Valley.

The proposed Disney/ABC Studios at the Ranch would occupy 56 acres of the sprawling, 890-acre ranch just off Route 14 at Placerita Canyon Road, just south of Santa Clarita. Plans call for six pairs of soundstages, talent bungalows, administrative and production offices, storage and a commissary and other amenities.

The project would be a much-needed boost to Los Angeles' entertainment-industry economy, which has been buffeted by a production slowdown triggered by the recession and the decade-long outflow of film and TV jobs to other countries and states such as New Mexico, Louisiana and New York that offer generous tax breaks and credits. Disney-owned ABC moved its own sitcom "Ugly Betty" from Los Angeles to New York last year, which helped spur the state Legislature to implement its own film tax credit program this year to curb so-called runaway production. Still, as Disney's announcement attests, the bulk of television production remains in Los Angeles.

Richard Ballering, executive director of production for ABC Studios, said the project would address the studio's shortage of production facilities. The network can have as many as 16 to 23 television productions taking place during the height of pilot season. With only seven soundstages on the Walt Disney Studio lot, production ends up scattered at facilities throughout the region, he said.

At the same time, Ballering said audiences are demanding more varied settings for prime-time dramas like "Brothers & Sisters," which now occupies four of Disney's seven soundstages. With indoor space at a premium, Ballering said, more and more production is taking place on location throughout Los Angeles -- a costly proposition, at a time when ad revenues are shrinking.

These needs set the stage for ABC Studios at the Ranch, whose 216,000 square feet of soundstage space -- 18,000 square feet per soundstage -- could accommodate four established shows or six freshmen series.

"This will help us to better manage our portfolio of shows," Ballering said.

The ranch has been used as an outdoor filming location since the late 1950s, when Walt Disney selected it as the ideal setting for "The Adventures of Spin and Marty" segments of the Mickey Mouse Club. Its undeveloped mountain ranges and meadows have proved the scenic backdrop for such motion pictures as "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" and "The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement" and such television shows as "Boston Legal" and "American Idol."

Ballering said the indoor facilities would not interfere with the vistas of Placerita Canyon.

The project, if approved, would create more than 3,000 construction jobs and contribute \$522 million to the local economy, Ballering estimates. Once completed, it would add 2,854 full- and part-time jobs.

"The proposed expansion will be a significant economic boost for the Santa Clarita Valley and northern Los Angeles County," said Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, in a statement. "Although the county must review and analyze Disney's application, I am encouraged that one of the world's largest and most successful entertainment companies is making this commitment to film here in the County of Los Angeles."

Paul Audley, president of FilmLA, said the state-of-the-art production facility signals Disney's commitment to keeping production local. He said California's new film and TV production incentive must have factored into the entertainment giant's decision to invest in Los Angeles. The program offers up to a 20% to 25% tax credit for television series that relocate to California, new television series produced for basic cable, movies of the week and feature films that cost less than \$75 million.

"It's a good signal to the state of California that they need not only to continue but to expand their incentives," Audley said. "Because financial decisions like this by the studios are benefited by leveling the playing field in California against the other states."

Jack Kyser, chief economist for Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., said he has seen renewed interest in investing in local production, noting that NBC Universal plans to improve its studio production and post-production facilities as part of a \$3-billion long-term investment in Universal City.

"People are making investments," Kyser said, "So this is good news for the local economy."

[**Updated at 3:20 p.m.:** An earlier version of this post indicated that the total soundstage space of the proposed project was 18,000 square feet.]

-- Dawn C. Chmielewski and Richard Verrier

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnewsbuzz/2009/10/disney-plans-new-soundstage-and-production-facility-in-santa-clarita-valley.html>