

## **Santa Clarita's courtship of the film industry pays off**

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The city of Santa Clarita has done well as a filmmaking center even as the rest of Southern California seems mired in an endless fight against runaway production.

That isn't by accident. It's the only municipality in Los Angeles County with its own production incentives program. Plus, the 10-year-old Santa Clarita Film Office is ever accommodating and other elements of city government spend a good deal of effort promoting the northern suburb's growing production infrastructure and striking locations.

More than half-a-dozen TV series, including top-rated drama "NCIS," Appalachia-set cable darling "Justified" and elaborate reality competition "Wipeout," are based in the nearby hills and ranches, and at facilities such as Valencia Studios.

"The film industry is one of our biggest priorities because of the economic impact and the jobs it creates for local residents," the city's Economic Development Department manager, Jason Crawford, explained. "We've seen the amount of filming increase over the years -- in fact, the last fiscal year was the biggest year yet for us both in the number of permits we issued and in the number of film days."

There were 878 film days, 341 Film Office permits issued and a \$19 million to \$20 million economic impact for local businesses from July 2010 to June 2011.

The City Council's latest move was its Nov. 8 unanimous approval of the Movie Ranch Overlay Zone. The new zoning designation simplifies rules and permitting procedures for productions on movie ranches, as well as extending those properties' owners ability to host shoots and build permanent facilities such as soundstages "by right" (i.e., without having to obtain permission from the city).

Now, if they can just wrangle all of those pretty movie ranches that dot the valley to herd them inside the city limits ...

Only one of 10-odd movie ranches currently operating in the Santa Clarita Valley -- Newhall's Melody Ranch, once owned by Gene Autry -- lies inside the city boundaries. Most of the others, such as Disney/ABC's Golden Oak Ranch, occupy adjacent, unincorporated county and national forest territory.

While Disney -- which will start building a state-of-the-art soundstage complex at Golden Oak next year -- has not yet asked the city to annex its property into the new MOZ, two privately owned ranches at the other end of Placerita Canyon Road have already applied to come under the city's jurisdiction.

"I'm very happy about being annexed," said Steve Arklin, owner of the 200-acre Rancho Deluxe. "I've lived in Sand Canyon since 1959, so it's not like I ever thought I didn't live in the city of Santa Clarita. So it just made sense to be in the city when they approached us with the idea.

"Instead of being small fish in the big bowl, we'll be the ... I don't know if it's big fish, but there aren't as many fish in this bowl," Arklin added with a laugh.

"I'm sure it will make permitting simpler for us," added Derek Hunt, whose family has owned the adjacent Sable Ranch since the late 1960s.

"And it will benefit the city by generating revenue that, rather than leaving, will stay here. Permitting fees have paid for a lot of improvements around here."

Until Deluxe and Sable are processed into Santa Clarita - which should take about nine months - filmmakers will continue to pull shooting permits for the properties from FilmL.A., the nonprofit clearinghouse that processes permits for the city of Los Angeles and unincorporated areas of the county. The Santa Clarita Film Office will take over those duties, and receive the permit fees, for the ranches that enter the Overlay Zone.

The folks in downtown L.A. don't seem to have a problem with that.

"The city of Santa Clarita does a tremendous job of becoming film friendly in every aspect," said Todd Lindgren, FilmL.A.'s vice president of communications and public affairs. "I'm not surprised that they're doing what they can to try to make it more favorable to film in Santa Clarita. When we are able to keep productions in the region, we all benefit."

"We believe that filming belongs in Southern California," Santa Clarita Mayor Marsha McLean said. "We do not want to see filming going out of state because productions are not treated well or they don't have what they need."

A surprising range of location needs can be fulfilled at Rancho Deluxe and Sable alone.

Arklin, who previously ran a waste disposal business, first started developing his property 25 years ago as a vacation destination for his family.

There's a man-made, trout-and-bass filled lake fed by a waterfall coming down a formation resembling Vasquez Rocks in nearby Agua Dulcè, a longtime favorite filming location.

A Mediterranean villa, where Eminem and Bruno Mars have shot music videos, commands a hill with views that could be Tuscany from the Valley side or the Alps on the mountain face.

The log cabin village Columbia Pictures built for the Cameron Diaz comedy "Bad Teacher" still stands. There's also a small strip of Old West buildings (one of which houses a martial arts dojo), rifle range and a higher hilltop with a helicopter pad and panoramic views. Buffalo, alpacas, miniature horses and numerous other animals are raised throughout the property.

Much of the ranch can be viewed at [aranchodeluxe.com](http://aranchodeluxe.com).

Next door, Sable boasts an entire train's worth of passenger cars, assorted vintage homesteads including a tin-roofed stone house built in the 19th century, and a bigger, more decrepit Western town set.

"I leave it like it is because if you try to fix it, they don't like it," Hunt said, referring to location scouts and set decorators. "If you want a nice one, you go to Melody."

The home of noted horse star Fury before the Hunts bought it, Sable Ranch has hosted film shoots since the 1940s. Derek Hunt counts such shows as "Heroes," "JAG," "The A-Team," "Airwolf," "Knight Rider," "Roots," and movies like Mel Brooks' "Robin Hood: Men in Tights" and "Rush Hour 4" among his many guests.

For Hunt, coming into the city's MOZ is an act of community responsibility as much as anything else.

"The city trying to make it friendlier here for the film companies is a good thing because it helps everybody else - restaurateurs, stores," Hunt said.

Arklin happily views it as the next significant step on a proud historical continuum.

"Placerita Canyon is becoming the Hollywood Boulevard of the 21st century," Arklin said. "You've got Melody at one end, Disney/ABC there, then ourselves at the east end."

"The movie industry has been a big part of the city of Santa Clarita, way back to (silent Western star) William S. Hart," Arklin noted.

"I think they like it here, and it's done real good for our town."