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Writers Guild Strike Impacts SCV

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By the time you read this story the Writers Guild of America and Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers may have inked a deal to put the "town" back to work.

When Hollywood says "town" it means everyone who works in the entertainment industry - which includes a large number of individuals and businesses in the Santa Clarita Valley.

"It is estimated that location filming in the SCV contributes \$21 million annually to the local economy," said Jessica Freude, film and tourism administrative analyst, Santa Clarita economic development division.

When the writers strike began on Nov. 5 scripted television production came to a halt almost immediately.

A few shows with scripts in the bank were able to continue shooting for a few weeks, but those shows were few.

In the SCV more than 6,000 individuals are estimated to work in the film and television business, said Jason Crawford, Santa Clarita economic development manager. Those unemployed by the strike include not just writers, but everyone who is involved with a production from stage hands to set builders, camera operators to sound technicians - and more.

"We did a labor analysis study last year that gives us an approximate number of people in working in different industries among our SCV population," Crawford said. "The writers strike is definitely affecting us both in business and residential."

Larry Mankin, president and CEO of the Santa Clarita Valley Chamber of Commerce, said effects of the writers strike have been most visible recently.

"I think for the first time we are seeing the strike having an impact on the local companies especially in those areas involve services and products that people have the option of purchasing," Mankin said.

He said areas of commerce most affected include restaurants, big ticket items, furniture and "items people buy they really don't need."

The resolution of the strike can come none too soon for businesses that earn their income from the entertainment industry.

"I've chatted with some grips who are out of work and a gentleman who is a caterer. He has eight

trucks and only has one out on a job," Mankin said. "All those ancillary services are being dramatically impacted by the strike."

Crawford said that an analysis of crewing on television programs shot in the SCV finds that an average of 30 percent of the crew lives within the SCV.

"Before the strike we had seven television shows based in SCV studios and they all stopped shooting because of the strike," Crawford said. "Each show would have roughly a crew of 100-120, so that is normally 700 people that would be working in the SCV that are not."

The ripple effect on SCV business of the strike includes the thousands of SCV residents who are unemployed by the strike and the lack of business from productions shot in the SCV now shut down from the strike.

Among those SCV productions are Nickelodeon's "Zoe 101," NBC's "NCIS," CBS' "The Unit," NBC's new "Knight Rider," FX's "The Riches" and HBO's "Big Love."

"Spending by residents affected by the strike has impacted SCV stores, restaurants, gas stations, everywhere people spend money," said Crawford. "In addition, the production itself would spend money locally - they would buy lumber to build sets and put people in hotels, buy clothes for their wardrobe - so all that spending has become a trickle."

Mankin said areas of the SCV economy you wouldn't normally associate with the entertainment industry have also been affected.

"I know it's impacted our auto dealers, bookstores and so many other local businesses," he said. "It is becoming a serious issue for our valley."

Crawford said Santa Clarita has been aggressive in reaching out to the entertainment industry in efforts to attract film and television business to the SCV.

"This past year, 2007, was a record-breaking year for us - until the bottom fell out in December," he said. "It makes us nervous that we have to recapture that momentum once the strike is resolved."

The SCV is home to nearly 20 sound stages - 10 at Santa Clarita Studios, two each at Melody Ranch, Avenue Scott Stages and at the Mann Biomedical Park. Three stages are at Valencia Studios.

Crawford said television commercial production and feature film production was not affected by the writers strike.

"We've been getting a little bit of activity around town, but not anything near what it was before the strike. And the area movie ranches seem to be active, Disney Ranch and Blue Cloud for example," he said.

However, one restaurant owner (who declined to be identified), said the strike can't end soon enough.

"I don't think they (the writers and producers) know how much they've hurt business - and hurt people," he said. "But just because they settle it doesn't mean that everyone will start spending money again, many people have dug themselves a deep hole because of this strike."

The strike may be resolved in time for the annual Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Oscar) telecast, but the effects will linger.

"I think there is a lot of pressure to settle before the Oscars and now that the Directors Guild has settled there is increased pressure on the writers," Crawford said. "The quicker it is the better it is for everybody. If it lasts too long we'll lose the rest of the television season and have to wait through the summer hiatus and then come back in the fall - and that would be a long time."

However, before everyone gets too excited about any resolution to the writers strike, the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) contract is up June 30. They are expected to make similar demands as the writers for Internet and new media compensation. The good news is that any deal the writers hammer out is expected to be a basis for the new contract for the actors, too.