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Do film breaks bypass small firms?

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Who is the real state Sen. Nancy Cassis?

"The Terminator" to some moviemakers thinking of filming here to take advantage of Michigan's lucrative incentives?

Or "Die Hard" champion for small business owners who aren't getting what they think is their fair share of breaks from the state?

Depends who's talking.

Cassis, the teacher turned politician, has some Hollywood types worried about plans for future Michigan projects because of her threats to put reins on the state's lucrative film incentives.

Cassis, R-Nov, and chairwoman of the powerful Senate Finance committee, has been a critic of the state's year-old film incentives since state legislators and the governor signed off on them.

"I am not an opponent of the incentives but, with all Michigan is facing, I don't think it is right for us to focus so much on this one industry," she said. "We need to do more than keep an open checkbook for Hollywood producers and help our bread-and-butter small businesses."

The incentives -- the nation's most lucrative -- have put Michigan on Hollywood's radar for moviemaking. Clint Eastwood, George Clooney, Sigourney Weaver, Drew Barrymore and other big names have shot or starred in movies in the state as a result.

Cassis says the incentives aren't having as much impact as proponents contend. But she is a fan of using tax incentives to lure more long-term investment by the film industry -- including proposals for studios in Allen Park and Pontiac.

But, she argues, the incentives have only made some Hollywood types wealthier when small businesses aren't getting breaks.

Eastwood's thumbs-up

Those charged with economic development in Michigan see the film incentives as representing potential -- short- and long-term.

"Clint Eastwood said, 'If you want to make a movie, go to Michigan,'" said Robert Ficano, Wayne County Executive, referring to "Gran Torino," which Eastwood produced and starred in and shot in Detroit and the Grosse Pointes last summer.

"With the tax incentives in Michigan, we are terminating 'The Terminator' from California, as film production in California is the lowest it's been in 25 years," Ficano added. "So, those in the Legislature should keep their mitts off and don't try and fix what is not broken."

Jimmy Lifton, a movie and TV show producer lured by the incentives, was taken aback when he first heard Cassis talk late last year.

"Yes, I talked to Nancy Cassis," Lifton said last week during the unveiling of his Unity Studios Inc. in Allen Park, where he hopes to build a \$146-million movie/TV production house and training site to employ 3,500 people.

But after talking to her, he was less concerned.

Lifton, who runs Oracle Productions in Burbank, Calif., grew up in Southfield and spent lots of time at his dad's dental office in Melvindale.

He said he ultimately decided to come to Michigan and not Louisiana, which also rolled out the red carpet to land his studio, because of Michigan's skilled workforce.

Lifton sang the praises of the UAW, Teamsters and other union members in attendance at the news conference in Allen Park's offices where Ficano, Mayor Gary Burtka and about 300 others gathered.

Compuware wins role

One firm thrilled about Lifton's move to Allen Park is Compuware.

The Detroit-based company has lined up IT and other work linked to the filmmaker's fledgling enterprise.

"We will provide all architecture and infrastructure design for the entire property as well as over IT operation," said Bob Kennedy of Compuware.

He said he expects more announcements and business from Unity Studio within 45 days.

"The fact a film studio is looking to Michigan to expand their operation is going to do wonderful things for Michigan's economy and bring jobs here," Kennedy said.

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