



"Leatherheads" brings money into Statesville

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Monday, June 11, 2007

For two weeks in May, Statesville basked in the limelight cast by Hollywood.

Local residents crowded on the corner of Center Street hoping to get a glimpse of George Clooney or Renee Zellweger during the filming of "Leatherheads."

The influence of the film was more than a blocked off street or an autograph - it was great for business.

Greater Statesville Chamber of Commerce President David Bradley said one of the producers told him that, on average, feature films contribute about \$300,000 to the local economy for each day of filming. If that is true, the 10 days of filming would have brought in at least \$3 million, Bradley said.

"I don't have any way to confirm that though," he said. "You could probably lessen that slightly because not all of them were able to stay here."

Of course, it will be a while before Universal Studios informs the state of North Carolina and the Charlotte Regional Partnership how much money was spent here, said Beth Petty, director of the film division for the Charlotte Regional Partnership.

"It usually depends on the project, whether it's an independent film or a feature film," Petty said.

Adding up the cost

A lot of people involved directly with the film were unwilling to talk about just how much money they were paid.

Justin O'Neil, operations manager for Thomas Wilson Properties in Mooresville, said although there was never a formal agreement on the matter, movie makers asked the real estate company not to disclose how much they were paid.

Thomas Wilson Properties is in the process of purchasing the Historic Vance Hotel on the corner of Center and Front streets from Statesville City Councilman Cecil Stallard.

Across the street, Universal Studios spent around \$11,300 to rent the Statesville Civic Center for two weeks, said Civic Center Events Coordinator Fay Bradshaw.

Bradley is one of the people who worked to lure the producers and directors to Statesville.

"The implication sometimes is that Universal Studios came in and threw all this money around," he said. "The realities were much different."

He said studio representatives were willing to spend a lot of money, but they weren't about to be taken advantage of.

Still, Universal Studios could have dropped more than \$3 million in Statesville, Bradley said.

The Dana plant on Glenway Drive housed Universal Studios North Carolina office for three months. During that time, Bradley said, 30 to 100 people were working in the manufacturing facility making sets, costumes and giving extras haircuts.

"Those are three months that people were eating at local restaurants, staying at hotels and buying gas," he said. "The coolest economic impact is that they were here for three months."

O'Neil said movie crews left the Vance in better condition than they found it. Crews placed a new coat of paint on the peeling walls of the Heritage Restaurant and did a lot of work on the indoor pool.

Crews just finished cleaning up the Vance on Thursday, O'Neil said.

"It was definitely a great experience," he said. "They definitely did everything they said they were going to do."

The money Thomas Wilson received from the film is going toward the Vance's upkeep.

"The Vance has been closed for two years," O'Neil said. "It's still an expensive, empty building."

In addition to the location, film makers used a number of local vendors for both the movie and personal use.

The film rented 21 cars from Alex Beam, owner of Memory Lane Motorsports and Historical Automotive Museum in Mooresville.

Beam's cars have been featured in a number of films and commercials.

"It's big money and I think a lot of states have realized it," he said. "You never know who is going to call you at four o'clock in the morning."

Mezzaluna II Italian Food on Center Street became a favorite for the production crew, and apparently Clooney himself.

Chef and owner Alex Ahmed catered for the movie while it was in Charlotte, Winston-Salem and South Carolina.

Apparently, Clooney learned about Ahmed's cooking through word of mouth.

Ahmed said Clooney's assistant would call in the orders, usually for 40 or more people, and then drive up from Charlotte and South Carolina in a van to get the food.

"It was very good for me," he said.

Ahmed said the production crew became regulars once filming began in Statesville.

Overnight, business at the small restaurant became busier as people came downtown to watch the film.

Impact on Downtown

Several downtown business owners felt the movie brought new life to the area.

People were coming downtown to see the stars, and while there would browse in retail shops and eat at the restaurants.

"We need a movie every month," said Mayra Perez, owner of La Dolce Vita Cafe on Broad Street.

If Mezzaluna II was the place for the crew to eat lunch, La Dolce Vita claimed breakfast.

Perez said the extra traffic brought in an extra \$300 or more a day.

"It was really good," she said. "Crew members would come in and spend \$50 to \$60 on just breakfast."

Carol Chappell, manager of Frame Gallery and Gifts on Broad Street, said the shop didn't see a boost in sales, but the extra traffic downtown gave it a lot of exposure.

"The day they started filming that door became a revolving door," she said.

But the one person she wanted to see never dropped by.

"George Clooney didn't come in here one time," she said, laughing.

Bradley said he's pleased with the feedback he's received from the downtown merchants.

"It's a good thing," Bradley said. "The objective of these businesses is to get people to walk by your storefront."

Employees at the different businesses downtown had different opinions about the movie. Some of the large-item retailers said the barricaded streets hurt their business because people didn't want to "lug" items around the corner.

Restaurateurs seemed to enjoy the extra traffic downtown, blocked traffic or not.

"In general, some days we had extra traffic here," said Adam Sayess, owner of Café Sayess. "It was good for the town."

Larry Johnson, owner of Sub Express on Broad Street, said the movie created a real buzz downtown. At his restaurant, receipts went up 10 percent.

"I know my customers, and we had so many new faces we didn't know were here," he said.
Recruiting movies

Soliciting movie studios, like recruiting businesses, is a highly competitive process, Beth Petty said.

"Sometimes we recruit by direct marketing. Sometimes it's based on past relationships," she said.

The location and the people have to meet the film maker's needs, and the state's incentive package doesn't hurt either.

"Leatherheads" locations in Statesville were chosen after a failed location deal earlier this year. Producers were ready to proceed before they realized the weather would be wrong for the film.

The location director for that film was hired to find locations for "Leatherheads," and set up a few appointments for producers to meet with local officials.

Movies, like businesses, can contribute a lot of money to the local economy, said Greater Statesville Development Corporation Director Michael Smith.

"It means positive PR for you community," he said.

Bradley said from what he hears the community conducted itself so well during the entire filming process, it will likely get other feature films in the future.

While Clooney and company were filming "Leatherheads," three other producers were in Statesville scouting it for a couple of future productions.

As competitive as the film business has become, many states have come up with an incentive package.

Petty said North Carolina offers a 15 percent tax break on goods and services and labor if the project spends \$250,000 or more in state.

Petty said the Charlotte region is becoming an increasingly popular place to shoot films. It just had its first Bollywood production and has another feature film taking place in South Carolina.

"We were the right fit for them (this time)," Petty said.