

Getting desert set for action

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By KIMBERLY PIERCEALL

Realizing that Hollywood isn't always going to show up in the Coachella Valley to make the resort town its backdrop, the leader of the Inland Empire Film Commission will rally desert city officials this week to foster the local film industry.

Sherry Davis, executive director of the commission, hopes tax breaks and free use of city sites, permits, office space and discounted law enforcement officials required at film shoots among other deals will encourage companies to hire local crews and production firms.

Davis has dubbed the proposal the Coachella Valley Production Incentives Program.

"What happens now is they come in with LA-based companies," she said of companies looking to film movies, commercials or print advertisements.

At a recent Palm Springs meeting with local film crews, Davis urged the members to promote their work with local ad agencies.

The Spotlight 29 casino in Coachella, for example, uses a New Jersey-based ad agency, and postproduction for the casino's commercials takes place in Indiana and Texas, according to Spotlight 29 spokesman Paul Speirs.

"We have to stop the migration," said Davis of local businesses choosing out-of-town production companies. Conversely, Coachella Valley production companies sometimes do work with businesses out of state and out of the country.

Despite local lobbying efforts to bring big-picture filming to the area when studios are looking for resorts, deserts and mountains -- or in the case of "Mission: Impossible III," the windmill farms in the San Gorgonio Pass -- studios have driven straight through to Arizona where tax and labor incentives are touted.

Davis said Coachella Valley officials who want the economic spending that comes with the resort area being used as a backdrop need to know it's largely a state issue.

"It's much bigger than the Coachella Valley," she said of the filming migration to areas with financial incentives.

Universal Pictures' upcoming Middle-East drama "The Kingdom" scouted the Coachella Valley, but opted for Arizona. The pilot for a television drama called "Hidden Palms" on the CW network was filmed in Palm Springs and Indian Wells, but since it's been picked up, the series chose Arizona.

"We lost two significant economic engines to Arizona," Davis said.

In a written overview of the incentives program, Davis wrote that tax breaks and other incentives may be viewed as punitive to city governments, but more filming would effectively feed the local economy.

"It shows public support for an industry that can prosper here, has flourished here in the past, but currently does not," Davis wrote.