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## Michigan businesses happy to get into the film biz

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COMMERCE TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — Michigan has desperately sought ways to diversify its economy in the wake of the auto industry's downward trend.

Forays into renewable energy and health care are being explored, but the one new industry that's already paying dividends for the struggling state is moviemaking. Michigan has been drawing filmmakers in droves since tax incentives — among the most generous in the nation — went into effect last year.

Craft services and party rental companies are finding their businesses booming with film opportunities after the number of automotive commercial shoots and pharmaceutical presentations dried up. Two firms stayed put in Michigan after brief flirtations with work in Oregon and Pennsylvania.

And a small technology company northwest of Detroit has looked to Hollywood to pay the bills when the auto industry isn't providing as much business.

Commerce Township-based IGI has supplied automakers for a decade with high-end visualization systems that allow them to envision more clearly the vehicles they're about to build.

The economic slide in the auto sector got IGI founder Pat Hernandez thinking about other industries that could use his company's products — medical and oil and gas exploration among them.

That's when "we stumbled upon" movies, he said.

Earlier this year, IGI rented space at a National Association of Broadcasters conference in Las Vegas, where it showed off its PowerWindow 4K device — essentially a large (10½ feet wide by 5 feet tall) TV that has a Sony 4K projector built into it.

Someone from Red Digital Cinema, a California-based maker of digital video equipment, happened upon the PowerWindow at the conference and recognized its potential use in movie production. He told IGI that the PowerWindow could be used by directors who wanted to see their dailies — footage of scenes before editing — in 4K resolution, the highest quality available for digital video.

It's a development that thrills IGI executives, who are excited by their company's potential role in the digital cinema revolution.

"We were so focused on the auto industry and solving their problems ... and lo and behold this 4K PowerWindow that we developed was just the perfect product for filmmakers," IGI marketing director Ted Woerner said.

It's still early in IGI's plan to expand into the movie biz, but the company has had one success story so far, with a PowerWindow playing a part in a promotional video for the movie "Fame" — a remake of the 1980s film — that was shown at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Meanwhile, a nearby company has found its booming business in the middle of another flashback to the Reagan era: "Red Dawn," the '80s Soviet invasion flick.

Bryan and Megan Meganck, the owners and operators of an Auburn Hills craft services company, have been putting in 18- to 20-hour days on the remake's set providing food and drink to the cast and crew.

The Megancks were spending more time in Portland, Ore., in 2007, working on commercial shoots after similar opportunities in their home state had dried up. A year later, things changed dramatically for them.

"We got contacted by five productions the day after the incentives passed, and we realized, 'Boy, we've got to get back to Michigan full-time. This movie thing is about to take off,'" Bryan Meganck said.

Post-incentives, the Lake Orion couple hired four full-time employees and three part-timers and got called to work on almost every major film production that came to southeastern Michigan. They've spent a half-million dollars upgrading their restaurant equipment and vehicles.

Rodney Ouellette was in a similar predicament. The party rental company he co-founded in 1991 with his brother was on the verge of moving to Pittsburgh when the tax incentives became a reality.

Now Harrison Township-based S&R Event Rental gets called by 70 percent of the movies that shoot in the Detroit area, said Ouellette, who has hired eight new full-time employees.

His company, which has worked on films from "8 Mile" to "Gran Torino," handles the "stuff people don't like to think about" such as supplying executive bathrooms, tents, air conditioning and heaters to movie sets. It also provides cleaning and other services — S&R even power-washed snow off a roof and brushed it off the grass to make Michigan in February look like California for the film "High School."

"Hundreds and hundreds of people are being put to work because of these movies. The incentives are working," Ouellette said. "The residual effects are uncountable."

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<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2009/dec/25/science/chi-ap-mi-michiganmovies-bu>

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