



Albuquerque Studios to build more sound stages, expand into rail yard

By Erik Siemers

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When your commodity is space and you run out of it, you have nothing left to sell.

That's the story at Albuquerque Studios, which is why executives from the Mesa del Sol film production facility announced plans Tuesday to expand both its space and its reach in the community — including temporary use of the historic Barelás rail yard near Downtown.

The studios' six sound stages have been booked solid with feature-film and TV series productions since they opened a year ago, and remain booked through September, said Nick Smerigan, Albuquerque Studios' chief operating officer.

So, instead of turning away new clients, the studios are building two additional 18,000-square-foot sound stages and a 50,000-square-foot building providing space for offices and millwork.

"We're basically out of product," Smerigan said Tuesday, from inside one of the massive warehouse-like stages.

In addition to the expansion, Smerigan announced Albuquerque Studios has entered into an agreement with Union Development Corp. to manage the film production work at the city-owned rail yard between the railroad tracks and Second Street Southwest.

The Albuquerque City Council in November authorized the purchase of the 27-acre property for \$9.4 million. While the site eventually will house the long-awaited Wheels Museum, the city is studying other permanent uses for the site.

City Councilor Isaac Benton said the Urban Land Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank, will bring in a team of land development experts next week who will spend a week devising potential uses for the property.

Meantime, Union Development Corp. is managing the site, and Benton said employing film projects is a way to ensure the rail yard remains secure and generates revenue for the city.

Jeremy Hariton, senior vice president of Albuquerque Studios, said a feature film is expected to begin a six-month production at the rail yard by late March. He would not disclose details about the production.

The use of the rail yard as a film site might only be temporary, depending on how the city develops the property. But studio officials hope they can play some role in the future.

"As long as the city will have us, we'd like to bring business onto the rail yards," Smerigan said.

The studios' new sound stages are under construction and should be completed by June 1, Smerigan said. A TV production is scheduled to begin work around that time, he said.

To date, Hariton said the studios have housed parts of three feature films — "Game," "The Spirit," and "Tennessee" — and the TV series "Breaking Bad" and "In Plain Sight."

Smerigan said the studios recently saw about 1,200 film industry workers on its lot, about 65 percent of whom were from the Albuquerque area.

He said the number of local film industry jobs is poised to grow as the studio and the industry continue to expand in Albuquerque.

"We're committed to building a \$1 billion industry here," Smerigan said. "We believe the (new) stages will continue to help build the crew base."



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