

Officials say film studio would be good for region

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SOUTH WINDSOR — While it might appear to be an overnight phenomenon, the proposed \$90 million film studio complex off Interstate 291 has been more than 20 years in the making.

“All good things come to those who wait,” Town Manager Matthew B. Galligan said Monday.

Galligan, along with seven other officials, recently visited Albuquerque Studios in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is owned by the same group proposing the complex in South Windsor. They reported their findings Monday during an informational meeting at Town Hall.

Others who toured the studio and the surrounding city were Mayor Cary Prague, Police Chief Gary Tyler, Fire Marshal Walter Summers, Town Planner Marcia Banach, Economic Development Coordinator Craig Stevenson, and Town Council members Kathryn Hale and John Pelkey.

The council members and mayor paid for their own transportation and lodging during the four-day visit Feb. 23 through 26.

Galligan said that since 1987, the area around I-291 and Route 5 has undergone numerous transformations and regulation alterations to prepare the site for the kind of development proposed by Los Angeles-based developers Pacifica Ventures LLC, and its partner, Halden Acquisition Group LLC of Providence.

Town Planner Marcia Banach remembered a time when the area’s zoning would have excluded a development such as a film studio, but that was changed by the Planning and Zoning Commission with the creation of the I-291 Gateway Zone.

Banach said the zone, which is surrounded by an industrial zone, is far enough away from residential areas to mitigate sound issues.

The project would include up to eight sound stages, offices, a mill building, a hotel, and

restaurants on 81 acres in the area where the old drive-in theater was located on the northwest corner of I-291 and Route 5, or John Fitch Boulevard.

Over \$30 million invested in zone

Town, federal, and state funds, along with other grants and investments totaling more than \$3 million have been pumped into the area over the years, Galligan said. That's paid for things including the realignment of Route 30 with I-291

In 1997, the town created the Redevelopment and Implementation Agency, a five-member board that convenes monthly with the objective of boosting the town's economy, Galligan said.

By creating the agency, the town became eligible for state and federal grants and loans that otherwise would not have been available.

Banach said the anticipated increase in traffic for the film studio would be about 2,000 vehicles daily, with little impact, if any, on town roads. By comparison, Evergreen Walk Promenade Shops on Buckland Road has an estimated 20,000 vehicles daily, when fully built out.

Banach met with the city planner and was impressed with the solid construction and clean land use of the Albuquerque Studios, which have been in operation for 20 months.

"The building quality is very good, because they want to have the buildings last a long time," Banach said.

Summers said he met with his fire marshal counterpart in New Mexico to discuss fire management issues, along with pyrotechnic explosions, something that the Connecticut Studio, LLC likely would use frequently.

Summers said they were told that in the 20 months the Albuquerque Studios have been in operation the increase in emergency calls have been about "nil," with only two calls for minor injuries.

Tyler, who met with Albuquerque Police Chief Raymond Schultz, also said he was impressed with the safety and security measures used by the Albuquerque facility, and said town officials gave the group copies of forms and documents, saving South Windsor staff hours that they would have had to spend creating their own.

Tyler said they likely would not have gotten those copies if they hadn't physically been there.

"It is better to meet one-on-one, individually than through e-mail or on the telephone," Tyler said.

Prague said he was impressed not just with the studio, but when speaking to area businesses, along with Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chavez, about the overall positive impact the studio has

had on the economy.

Albuquerque has a population of about 900,000, or about a third of the population of Connecticut, Pelkey said.

Short- and long-term jobs

Pelkey said the film studio, which would employ about 600 construction workers, 100 studio employees, and about 2,000 film workers, not only would be good for the region, but also for the state because of the many direct, indirect, and induced jobs the studio would engender.

Film studio developers also expressed interest in working with Connecticut regional community colleges, trade schools, and local public schools to add curriculum to train individuals on the highly technical skilled positions needed, Pelkey said.

Hale, whose background is in tax law, said she was skeptical at first, but after visiting the studios, she was convinced that it is a real and viable development.

“This is big enough to benefit the whole region,” Hale said. “It would be the single-largest development in the history of South Windsor,” and would provide “a massive amount of taxable personal property.”

Stevenson said discontinuing or capping the 30 percent tax credit to the film studios that the state offers, and which drew the developers to Connecticut, would put a stop to this project.

Stevenson said area union officials have spoken with the developers and their counterparts in Albuquerque and feel positive that the prevailing wage project would provide jobs for local union members.

John Hollis with the Connecticut Teamsters said, “I am really excited about this,” adding that they welcome this project to the state.