

Large studio complex part of proposed development in west Valley

For years, Arizona has played host to the film industry, providing breathtaking backdrops of local and out-of-the-way scenery all over the state. With 300 plus days of sunshine and absence of natural disasters, the Valley of the Sun has quickly become the choice spot for filming "on location."

But once that filming is complete, film producers and directors have had no choice but to pack up their productions and head back, usually to Los Angeles, to finish the film in a sound studio because a lack of such facilities hinder the Valley's film-making efforts. But that all is about to change.

Icon Studios is planning to break ground on a \$70 million sound stage hopefully by the end of this year. Once the public hearing process is finished and zoning issues handled, construction is expected to be completed by the end of 1999. The studio, which will be located in Glendale, will contain 10 sound stages—approximately 1.5 million square feet—behind secured gates. There will be a special effects stage, a mill, general offices, administration building and storage facilities for sets and warehousing.

Icon is also planning on constructing a studio back lot with theme-related streets depicting scenes from New York and Chinatown. An estimated 1,600 square-foot master planned community, park and pedestrian mall will complete the project.

According to Jerry Kosowsky, a producer in Hollywood and managing partner of Icon Studios, the outside of Icon Studios will be as spectacular as the inside. "I want to do a lot of water treatment and plant life, so I'm planning on our entryways and features to have waterfalls," he says. "We are trying to work with the city right now for affluent water so that we can have a very green belt area that is not desert landscaped and does not destroy any natural habitats."

Once the studio is open, Kosowsky says 1,500 jobs will be available, a figure that does not include actors and actresses. These jobs, he says, will pay \$45,000 a year on average, and he expects 1,000 of the jobs to go to local residents. Not surprisingly, many in the Valley are very excited by the project. Already, companies have begun affiliating with Icon, including Scottsdale-based Continental Homes Holding Corp. which is planning on developing the area around the studio. "We have the development expertise and no studio expertise, and they had just the opposite, so it seemed like it was a match that might work," says David Maguire, vice president for land acquisitions for Continental Homes.

by Cynthia Scanlon

photography by Duane Darling

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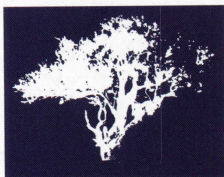
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Continental will be master planning a 3-mile wide area around the studio with the borders between Northern and 99th avenues, Glendale to Bethany Home, and 99th to 91st avenues. The 1,800 homes, which will range in price from \$90,000 to \$200,000, are expected to be phased in over a three-to five-year period. Kosowsky says the entire project should be finished

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within five to 10 years, with the completion date depending largely on the economy.

According to Kosowsky, high-level movie makers on the West Coast are more than ready for a sound stage to be located in Phoenix. "[They] are excited about this," he says. "We've had conversations with a lot of the top executives there including Paramount, CBS, Warner Bros., Disney, Columbia and Tri-Star."

Los Angeles is not the only city excited. Glendale is also looking forward to their newest neighbor, according to Diane McCarthy, president of WESTMARC, an economic development coalition representing 15 communities in western Maricopa County. "We're thrilled about this," she says. "It's going to promote and really change the whole landscape out here in the west Valley."

She adds, "Glendale has been very carefully looking at that whole western tier and what they wanted to do with it. This is the last piece of Glendale to be fitted in, and it's going to be a huge boost."

James Devine, director of economic development for the city of Glendale, couldn't agree more. "It puts Glendale on the map, and it's our turn," he says.

According to Devine, Glendale has been tracking its population and its development strategies in order to provide a good quality-of-life to its residents, encourage development and economic growth, while keeping the negatives that

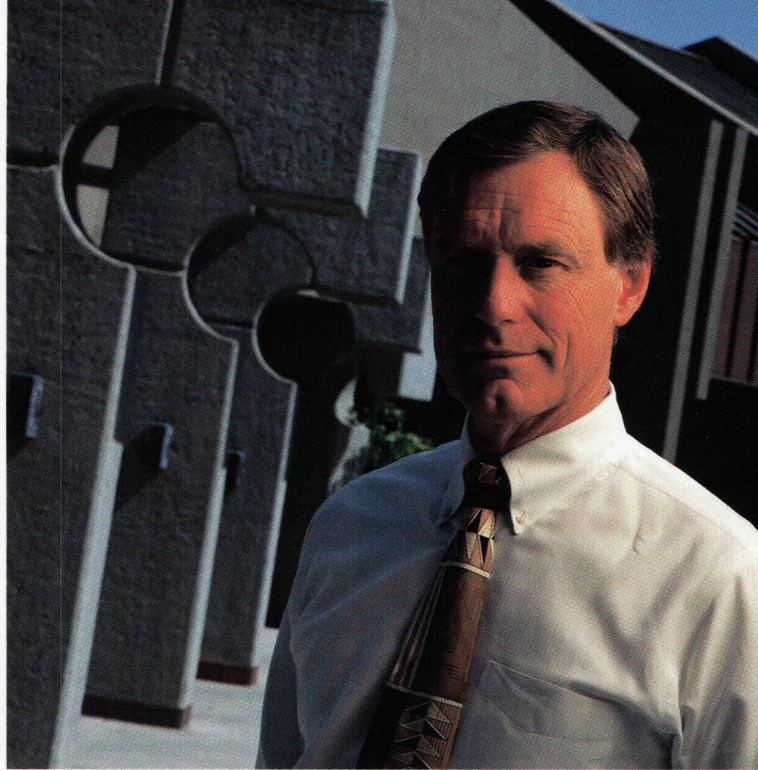
growth can bring in check. This philosophy, while sound, is not always easy to achieve. Especially with the growth that Glendale is now experiencing. The current population of the city stands at around 190,000. In 1995, that figure was 182,000.

To meet its quality-of-life issues and development demands, and in looking at proposed projects such as Icon Studios, Devine says the city council looks at what a project will contribute to the city. In addition, a proposed project must meet two specific criteria the city council has set up. The first criteria is master planned growth such as the developments in the Arrowhead area. And secondly, the project must provide "21 century" jobs, which much of the movie industry represents.

Devine says the Glendale City Council has initially approved Icon Studios because it does meet these criteria, especially where jobs are concerned. "The city council designated that area as an employment area because we are lacking, compared to our competitors, in business park inventory," he says. "So the area will be a quality business park area, with a studio and other employment possibilities as well."

The late mayor of Scottsdale, Herb Drinkwater was instrumental in getting Kosowsky to give Arizona a serious look for his project, says Kosowsky. It was Drinkwater that urged Kosowsky to consider reactivating the old Carefree Studios in Scottsdale. When Kosowsky, who is a Glendale resident, took a look, he determined that the studios would not accommodate what he was trying to do. But he decided to scout around Arizona and see what might turn up. "We looked at expansions and building new stages in California, but we felt it was a more economically feasible situation to try to put studios in Arizona," says Kosowsky. "Plus, I live in Glendale, and I was tired of going to California for all my production."

Councilman Jim McAllister, who is Kosowsky's neighbor,



James Devine, director of economic development for the city of Glendale

mentioned the Glendale property. Kosowsky says he spent four months doing the due diligence on the property—everything from traffic noise control, airport access, and existing infrastructures of sewer, water and fiber optic lines. In addition, support services such as equipment rental, nurseries, hardware stores, lumber yards, major

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Linda Peterson Warren, director of the Arizona Film Commission

shopping centers also had to be scoped out.

"We had a checklist of 24 items that needed to be met in order for a studio to function properly," says Kosowsky. "I did this kind of unit and technical managing for studios in California as well as producing and directing, so I know what the criteria are."

Before Kosowsky's interest, Glendale had a site specific feasibility study done to determine the property's potential. Once the property passed Kosowsky's checklist, he had Economic Research Associates read the study and give an opinion. "They sent us a letter saying it was a good study," says Kosowsky. "With that in hand, we went forward and have been moving forward ever since."

As might be expected, the Arizona Film Commission is extremely pleased with the proposed project. "We have a long history of film in Arizona as well as a stellar economic impact to all of the state," says Linda Peterson Warren, director of the Arizona Film Commission under the Arizona Department of Commerce. "A sound stage facility of state-of-the-art proportions would increase our offering."

According to the Arizona Film Commission, location-filming brought in \$130 million to the state's economy last year. The year before, that number was \$103.5 million. Other production houses, including Fox, added another \$30 million. Peterson Warren says Arizona's film industry has been primarily focused on location filming, concentrating on geographic as well as architectural sites throughout the



state. A sound stage, she says, would allow the state to move into "a whole cadre of different genres," including educational television, feature films, and other television programming.

"[Right now], we don't have the benefit of interior filming," says Peterson Warren. "We don't have television programming that relies on interior sets. We don't have that kind of opportunity to tout."

Peterson Warren says the Arizona Film Commission had a feasibility study conducted a few years ago that asked the question, "Does it make sense for sound stages to locate in Arizona?" "And the resounding objective research demonstrated a very strong yes," Peterson Warren says.

In addition to weather and entertainment talent, Peterson Warren points out another advantage Arizona has over some other cities is its proximity to Los Angeles. "We want to make sure that state-of-the-art stages are initiated in Arizona as opposed to some other competing jurisdiction," she says.

She points out that Canada's sound stages are filled all the time, with the most recent example being the filming of the *X-Files* television show (which has since relocated to Los Angeles). "Canada didn't even have an American film industry until those sound stages were initiated," says Peterson Warren.

If everything comes together, Arizona could find itself with a new reputation centered on reaching for the stars and touching them.

AB

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