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Bay Area Film Production Memo

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The following recommendations for boosting film production in the Bay Area synthesize findings from our field study and survey of Bay Area film and media makers, our collaborations with other stakeholders, BAVC Media's experience as a multidisciplinary media arts service provider, recommendations from our esteemed advisory committee representing the Roxie Theater, SFFILM, Ryzo Studio, East Bay Film Collective & Mindful Media, and the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, and feedback from our colleagues at Film SF (the San Francisco Film Commission). We believe that it's important for practitioners like us to have a say in local research design and implementation, and to be included in collaborative projects to address challenges and to seize opportunities.

We're grateful for the platform!

— Perspective on California

- After conducting interviews with representatives from seven areas of the US, reviewing literature, and meeting with peers in the Bay Area, we recognize that what's happening in the Bay Area reflects a much bigger national and global trend: film production is getting increasingly decentralized. The California Film Commission's (CFC) [Progress Report 2022](#) highlights the challenge of competing against jurisdictions that offer more generous tax incentives, opportunities to sell tax credits, better infrastructure, and a lower cost of living, even for the historically dominant Los Angeles region. CFC [announced](#) that its "4.0" updated version of film and television tax credits will become available in July 2025, and aims to address some of the challenges - by expanding workforce diversity incentives provisions, increasing funding for CFC's Career Pathways Training Program, introducing a new production safety program, and enabling tax credits to be refundable for the first time since the program was introduced in 2009. In 2022, CFC also introduced incentives for the development or renovation of sound stages and filming on certified California sound stages - a significant area of interest for Bay Area productions.
- If the Bay Area wants to become a significant player, we believe that our sector has to get more organized, capitalized, and sophisticated, similar to and aligned with the tech sector. The Bay Area has the regional assets (investors, technology, storytellers, universities, private foundations, and other training partners) to make significant headway with increased leadership and vision. We should continue to distinguish the Bay Area as a strong alternative and/or complement to Los Angeles.

— Tax Credit Incentives

- This is a basic point, but worth saying up front: Bay Area cities or the region could introduce a supplemental tax credit incentive(s), combined with the State's, that would help attract film productions more competitively in the US and abroad. In addition, weight should be given to the purpose of the tax credit, and mechanisms for recouping value when tax credits are transferred.
 - We encourage policymakers to consider issuing a local or regional tax rebate or credit (the former being easier to achieve) with strict requirements for hiring local workers. Film productions should have to do more than show a “good faith” effort to hire a substantial portion of local workers to receive an enhanced tax credit.
 - We also suggest following Louisiana's lead in providing an increased tax credit for homegrown film productions about local Bay Area stories. The Bay Area is struggling to support independent narrative filmmakers. This could increase investment interest in local narrative filmmakers and help elevate local stories.
 - Louisiana's [Entertainment Development Fund](#) has been a game-changer for film and media workforce development. Created in 2017, the EDF is funded through a 2% transfer fee that is collected when certified tax credits are transferred back to the state. Louisiana Entertainment receives 75% of the fees collected for the fund, and at peak capacity, this amounts to \$2.7M per year. The funds are distributed to experienced arts, media, and entertainment training providers.
- Getting film production incentives to be championed by elected officials and voters is an ongoing political and educational process. This sentiment was repeated by multiple interviewees across regions, including Oklahoma City and the Cherokee Nation Film Office. Media makers and film and media support organizations can be encouraged and taught how to advocate, educate, and build political power in this arena. They can do this by hosting community forums. This was recently demonstrated effectively by the East Bay Film Collective.
- In our field study, we heard that several cities successfully gained the support of their public officials by bringing them to production sets and educating them about the varied manual and skilled labor jobs that are created and sustained through film productions. Short of commissioning costly economic development studies that are challenging to commission with frequency, data collection tools such as [Creative Vitality Suite](#) (CVS) may be used to support education and advocacy efforts.

— Infrastructure

- Bay Area film production could be further supported through the development of a premiere sound stage. This is a top priority for Film SF. A number of the individuals that we interviewed from different parts of the country recounted how the presence of a large production facility has transformed their ability to attract large commercial productions. California's new [soundstage incentive program](#) is a promising step in the right direction. It requires that a soundstage is purpose-built, renovated, or converted for film, television, and/or media, that it has a minimum of 10,000 square feet of floor space, is column-free with a clear height of at least 20 feet under the permanent grid, and other technical features.
 - Are there ways that the broader film and media community in the Bay Area could rally support for a sound stage initiative?
 - *For future research: what could a successful public/private partnership look like? Can we access [bond financing](#)? Is it more compelling for a public agency, nonprofit consortium, or for-profit venture to lead?*
- Other infrastructure issues cited during the interviews include access to affordable vendors, equipment, trailers, and below-the-line positions. The absence and/or reliability of these elements adds significant cost to productions and can deter even productions that have strong creative reasons for being located in the Bay Area. Arguably, this is an area that can be addressed in a relatively short period of time.
 - The East Bay Film Collective is currently trying to address this issue by compiling a list of available transportation and vendors that are currently lacking, and by creating strategies for engaging existing local entrepreneurs (especially ones who have been disproportionately affected by inequality and gentrification) who haven't yet worked with film productions. They are interested in seeding entrepreneurial development programs, such as low-interest loans, mentorship, and other educational opportunities.

— Workforce Development

- Regional coordination and collaboration are key to effective workforce development programming. New Orleans' film office coordinates and funds training and workforce development offerings related to film and media. This helps reduce redundancies between programs and increases collaboration between organizations. We support efforts to centralize workforce development coordination for film and media in the Bay Area.

- There is currently minimal coordination between unions and nonprofit training providers in the Bay Area for all facets of film and media production. Increasing collaboration could be an opportunity for film and media makers to advance in well-paid and protected trade positions.
 - Pre-pandemic, Film SF piloted two union internship programs with IATSE Local 16 and the [Mayor's Opportunities for All](#) program with two major studios. This was a promising model for union/studio/public partnership that can be iterated upon in the future.
 - In 2023, NBCU created a partnership with unions and training organizations, including NOVAC in New Orleans, to boost below-the-line representation in key production positions, through its [Below the Line Traineeship and its Production Assistant Initiative](#).
- Film SF requires productions attempting to access the City's Scene in San Francisco tax rebate to make a good faith effort to hire locals via the City of San Francisco's First Source Hiring Program and its [WorkforceLinkSF](#). Film SF is also coordinating with training organizations like BAYCAT and BAVC Media to help participants utilize the program through planned orientation sessions and other supports. These are helpful efforts that can be built upon in the future.
- Online talent directories support film productions and spark collaboration. The Austin Film Commission hosts a [Production Directory List](#) that has more than 1,900 freelance contacts across all types of production roles. The nonprofit organization Brown Girls Doc Mafia also has an impressive [members page](#) on its website. Video Consortium has an [international member directory](#). Different methods can be used to filter candidates if desired, such as a local residency requirement, at least one film credit, completion of a local training program or certificate, and nomination by a local nonprofit film organization, to ensure alignment. If a centralized webpage existed for listing local talent, local and non-local productions could have easier access to a broad set of candidates, and more local workers could get hired. This project could potentially be funded by a regional foundation or corporate partner(s).
 - This concept could be extended to include prop houses, gear rentals, security, catering/crafty, sound stages, etc. to further increase the ease with which productions access necessary elements.
- Colorado offers [internships](#) and pre-apprenticeships for high school youth with film and media employers, especially with youth who face barriers to education and employment. Some of their best practices include offering "tier-based" services, starting with exposure opportunities like field trips, through internships for advanced students.

Colorado's pilot pre-apprenticeship program is offered on-site at high schools, to further increase access to participation. BAVC Media and a host of organizations in California are engaging in similar work. It requires a lot of time, navigating bureaucratic processes to participate in government programs, such as California's Department of Apprenticeships Standard's registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. [Arts2Works'](#) leadership in this arena has been helpful for BAVC Media, YouthBeat, and other media arts organizations in California.

- In New Orleans, one local training organization cultivated a partnership with a major studio. When the studio had an upcoming production and sought to hire local workers as Production Assistants in a short time frame, the training partner organized a training "boot camp" over a weekend. This example points to the need to develop deep relationships with studios and production companies and to stay nimble to meet private sector needs. In some instances, our workforce providers might have to forgo our aspirations for comprehensive workforce models (e.g. programs that require 6-12 months of training and mentorship) to achieve short-term wins for our participants. In addition, if local training providers could collaborate to offer training for entry-level roles on a regular basis, it would be easier to source candidates on short notice.

- There are examples of PA training programs that we can adapt, including "informal" education models and institutional ones. Brooklyn Workforce Innovation's [PA training program](#) is a strong example. LA City College offers a [PA certificate program](#).

- California's latest tax credit program requires eligible film productions to contribute 0.25% of their estimated tax credit allocation to the CA Film Commission's Pilot Skills Training Program that "helps prepare Californians from diverse communities for careers in the production industry and to file a diversity work plan. It is important to note that all but one of the training providers currently funded by the pilot program are located in and serving the LA area, and the other program is an online production accounting program.

We are hopeful that the State will expand service providers to regions outside of LA when our tax incentive program is expanded in 2025 via the 4.0 plan. Bay Area organizations and leaders should actively advocate for this change.

California also provides an "uplift", or an additional 5-10% incentive for qualifying productions to hire local workers, for significant special effects services occurring in California, and for film productions occurring outside of the 30-mile LA zone. The latter feature is especially important to highlight for Bay Area recruiting efforts.

— Artist Development

- Some of the Bay Area's leading artist development programs could dedicate more resources to building the pipeline of regional film and media makers, at advanced levels, instead of supporting national candidates who receive accolades and attention from national funders and distribution platforms. It could take a few years to achieve desired outcomes, such as stronger local artistic development applicants, and higher quality projects and completion rates.
 - Film SF's Film Space grant currently underwrites two local filmmaker residency programs at SFFILM (SFFILM's [FilmHouse](#) Residency) and BAVC Media ([MediaMaker Connect](#)), respectively. These programs are also supported by the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, the Perspective Fund, and other funders.
 - ◆ Building more structure into residency programs (like scheduled meet-ups, talks, and rough-cut screenings), supports higher participation for program participants. With current media technologies, and new preferences for working remotely, drop-in workspace programs are less attractive than they were pre-pandemic.
 - ◆ *How do we raise the profile of initiatives like these and attract more local funding? Are we making a strong case to new prospective funders?*
 - The New Orleans Film Society's film festival and South Summit are strong examples of programming that is primarily geared at supporting a particular region's stories and storytellers that have long been overlooked.
 - ◆ Similarly in the Bay Area, groups such as Cinemama, BAMMS, Bay Area Women Directors Collective, Bay Area Film Collective, and Women In Film San Francisco Bay Area convene filmmakers for events and conversations. Engaging successful filmmakers to headline these events increases participation and visibility.
- There are opportunities to promote intergenerational collaboration in our field, to promote professional development and wealth generation for younger emerging film and media makers, and to encourage reciprocity/connection for more experienced ones.
 - We suggest that our field can create more opportunities for experienced film and media makers to share their expertise and networks with emerging media makers via mentorships, apprenticeships, instructors, talks, rough cut screenings, etc.

- ◆ BAYCAT's [Infocus](#) event is an exciting example of what's possible at a large scale. It brings together corporate and nonprofit industry professionals and emerging media makers for an intergenerational networking event.

- In the Bay Area Media Maker Survey, more than a quarter of respondents reported working as a film instructor while another quarter reported being a tech sector worker. We are interested in future research to determine whether tech sector jobs are available and/or sustainable. Although tech sector work was not mentioned in our field study, we would consider further research to see if other models exist elsewhere. It is clear from the data so far that media makers are performing multiple roles and occupations to make ends meet. Training and workforce development providers should consider interventions that take this into account more to support financial health.

— Entrepreneurial Development

- Related to the last point, many independent filmmakers operate small production companies. There is ample room for entrepreneurial development training for small and emergent producers to run more successful small businesses, and to gain creative agency as film and media makers, especially those who are underrepresented in the industry. In Colorado, where the film and media industry is more nascent than in the Bay Area, a regional film support organization believes that this kind of "ground-up" approach will help film and media makers increase their financial viability and stay in Colorado, rather than moving to a larger film and media market. Critically acclaimed filmmakers such as Dawn Porter (a former Bay Area resident and founder of Trilogy Films), and Pete Nicks, Ryan Coogler, and Zinzi Evans (Bay Area residents and co-founders of Proximity Media) are examples of filmmakers who have built strong enterprises from their critical and commercial success. We should complement our artistic and technical training with business training.

— Networking

- Affinity groups - especially for film and media makers who are underrepresented in the sector - decrease isolation, build networks and collaboration, and help film and media makers advance their careers overall. We heard this from an interview participant in Chicago who co-founded [Mezcla Media Collective](#), a filmmaker collective for women of color, and we observe similar positive outcomes with SFFILM's [FilmHouse Residency](#), the [Center for Cultural Power's](#) Disruptors program, BAVC Media's [MediaMaker](#) Fellowship and Connect programs, and local collectives like [Cinemama](#) and the [Collective of Documentary Women Cinematographers](#).

- Creating opportunities for gathering is important for film and media makers who can feel isolated, especially for newcomers and emerging film and media makers. In our interviews, we heard that several film offices sponsor happy hours and other events. [The Bay Area Media Maker Summit](#) has provided opportunities for peer learning, a funder and festival fair, local filmmaker screenings, and social events. As much as possible, our sector should aim to generate the feeling that the *“right people are in the room”* through active and inclusive outreach and intentional facilitation.

— Shared Services

- FACETS, a nonprofit film and media organization in Chicago, created the [Chicago Alliance for Film Festivals](#) to increase collaboration across film festivals and other film and media organizations in the region, and to centralize a public calendar of events. Of the film offices, the [Austin Film Commission](#) maintains an exemplary website that makes it easy to access information about productions and permits, film festivals, grants and training, etc. As film and media organizations continue to rebuild audiences and revenue post-pandemic, reducing expenses and increasing engagement is vital.

— Perspective on Regional Film Production Incentives

- The concept of a regional film production incentive plan (e.g. covering the nine Bay Area counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, Santa Clara, San Mateo, Solano, and Sonoma), including workforce development services and infrastructure related to film production, is compelling for an interconnected region like the Bay Area, though we did not encounter a formal model in our investigation. Typically, states offer comprehensive plans, with a key feature being a tax credit and/or rebate, and local municipalities overlay “sweeteners”, like vendor discounts, access to high-value locations, and police services. Based on our review, it could be easier and faster to offer non-financial benefits on a regional scale, like location scouting services, collaborative training and workforce development offerings, and a shared webpage as short-term interventions, rather than financial incentives, due to political and budgetary factors.
 - However, we hypothesize that providing even a modest regional rebate could help stimulate film production, especially for the following types of projects:
 - ◆ Projects with strong creative reasons to film in the Bay Area, that face pressures to film elsewhere (e.g. *Blindspotting*, *I’m a Virgo*, *Black Panther*, *Book of Jobs*).

- ◆ Independent projects led by local emerging talent, who benefitted from local artist development programs like [SFFILM's Rainin Grant Program](#), BAVC Media's MediaMaker Fellowship, or the Center for Asian American Media's [CAAM Fellowship](#).
- ◆ Studio projects that are committed to filming in California that can be swayed to the Bay Area with adequate incentives and support.

— Takeaways

- In conclusion, if we join efforts, we are optimistic about the Bay Area becoming (and re-emerging) a more significant hub for film production, creative workforce development, and storytelling that reflects Bay Area communities and culture. Two adjacent, general areas of concern include our sector's reliance on volunteer, in-kind, and very part-time workers to support many of the efforts underway, and the high cost of housing, especially for emerging film and media professionals. To create a more sustainable and resilient sector, we encourage long-term investment in paid organizing and leadership, and affordable housing resources for artists, such as [Project Row Houses](#) in Houston.

Our partner at Ryzo Studios also points out the great shifts underway in the digital media/animation arenas of production, which are largely not included above. So far the changes have been felt most dramatically in Los Angeles, but the impacts are significant for the Bay Area as well, where employees have enjoyed fairly secure employment at Pixar, Lucas Film, and a few smaller studios for decades. In the last two years, the animation industry has seen large-scale layoffs of regular employees and a major softening of the market for freelance employees. More consideration is needed related to design interventions that can support this part of the industry, including advanced training related to generative AI and emerging technologies.

Our list of references and actions is by no means exhaustive. We hope that it will spark dialogue, more research, collaborative projects, and investment.

● BAVC
● MEDIA