

CHARLOTTE  
**BUSINESS  
JOURNAL**

**This time around, North Carolina's film industry could benefit from political outcry**



*The political fallout from Georgia's new voting laws could prove beneficially for the film industry in North Carolina. PRNewsFoto/Sherwin-Williams*



By Lauren Ohnesorge – Senior Staff Writer, Triangle Business Journal  
Apr 6, 2021

The cameras are rolling in North Carolina's Hollywood East, also known as Wilmington. The coastal city has hosted a slew of film and TV projects over the years, from "Dawson's Creek" to the in-progress series "Hightown" and upcoming space thriller "I.S.S."

And more could be coming.

“We think this will be the biggest year we’ve had in 10 years,” said Johnny Griffin, head of the Wilmington Regional Film Commission.

And it could get even bigger, as one of North Carolina’s biggest competitors – Georgia – when it comes to film sites has a public relations problem. Reports show that Georgia’s new voting law is getting staunch criticism from Hollywood – potentially the kind of outcry that causes production companies to ship their projects elsewhere.

Bill Vassar, executive vice president of EUE/Screen Gems Studio in Wilmington, said he wouldn’t speculate about the future, but said he had seen “no direct inquiries caused by the Georgia voting bill.”

But filmmakers in North Carolina in particular know boycotts are exactly what can happen with the passage of state bills. After all, when North Carolina’s now defunct “Bathroom Bill,” HB2, was passed, multiple productions elected to go elsewhere. Netflix (Nasdaq: NFLX), for example, chose not to film its teen drama “OBX” in North Carolina two years ago over the measure’s remaining anti-LGBTQ clause.



*Wilmington is a popular spot for film and television productions. City of Wilmington Facebook page*

Could Hollywood’s aversion to Georgia politics suddenly make North Carolina a contender for some of its projects?

Yes, says economic development expert John Boyd.

“I see incredible opportunity for North Carolina to target film production and other related multimedia tech jobs,” Boyd said, pointing to New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy’s pitch last week for Georgia’s film projects as an example. “The backlash in [Georgia] no doubt presents an opportunity for not just [New Jersey] but lower-cost regional alternatives like North Carolina and Tennessee.”

Griffin said his team is following the issue closely. Companies such as ViacomCBS (Nasdaq: VIAC), WarnerMedia parent AT&T and NBCUniversal parent Comcast (Nasdaq: CMCSA) issued statements decrying the measure. One of Georgia’s biggest film employers, Tyler Perry, has been outspoken against the bill, saying it “harkens to the Jim Crow era.” But Griffin hasn’t seen any productions cite Georgia’s bill in conversations with North Carolina officials about projects.

“But a lot of these companies may not come out and say it, they just all of a sudden stop calling,” Griffin said. That’s what happened in North Carolina with HB2 – they just stopped coming, he said. “But the voting issue is less of a lightning rod ... so companies may come out and say something.”



*One of Georgia’s biggest film employers, Tyler Perry, has been extremely outspoken against the bill, saying it “harkens to the Jim Crow era.”  
Tyler Perry Studios*

Regardless of what happens in Georgia, Griffin sees potential for the industry in 2021, he said. North Carolina is under consideration for multiple projects and if Georgia’s politics helps push it over the edge, it’s ready, he said.

“We’re back in the game now,” he said.

But he does note that Georgia’s heftier incentives program would provide a much more lucrative opportunity for mega projects than what can be found in North Carolina – and that the additional dollars might make it difficult to turn down over politics, depending on the project.

“We’re certainly monitoring and keeping dialogue going right now with productions, but it’s not like we’re going to go out there and make a broad statement,” he said.

North Carolina is – at the very least – on the major production firms’ radars already, he said.

Six productions were recently approved for funds from the North Carolina Film and Entertainment

Grant. Combined, those productions are expected to spend nearly \$135 million in the state, creating 5,700 job opportunities. And they include "I.S.S." out of LD Entertainment, which was approved for a rebate up to \$3.6 million to shoot in Wilmington.

Other projects recently approved for state funds in eastern North Carolina include Blumhouse Entertainment horror movie "The Black Phone," approved for a rebate of up to \$4.7 million to shoot at the coast. Lionsgate Television series "This Country," approved for \$8 million in rebates, also recently finished filming near the coast.