

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 91.

Chair Erickson and members of the Committee.

My name is Max Thomas and I am co-owner of Lights On, a production rental house here in Kansas and I am also the President of Grow Kansas Film.

Usually when people think of film, they think of Hollywood, of extravagance and excess. But when I think of film, something else comes to mind, I think of my family, I think of my childhood. I think of people who work hard to make a living. I think of businesses being built from the ground up. Today, you are going to hear about national opportunities, you're going to hear from one of the finest schools in our region, and you're going to hear from an Academy Award winning filmmaker, but I am here to tell you about the working people and the small businesses of this industry and why we are urging you to pass this bill.

As a third generation native son of Kansas and third generation film professional, I grew up in the film business watching my grandparents, my father, my uncle, and my aunt all work as crew on various film productions. I remember visiting working sets as a child and watching the crew work together. Even at a young age I could feel the passion and the work ethic that it takes to make a really good film project. After earning a non-film degree from K- State, I realized the apple didn't fall too far from the tree, and that I craved the mix of business and creative pursuits that the film industry provides. I grew into the family business and am now co-owner of Lights On, the largest film production rental house in the state. Located in Wyandotte County, we serve an average of 400 clients, facilitating about 800 jobs per year— all supporting the various rental needs of film production; lights, cameras, lenses, dollies, etc.

So, if all this business has already been coming here—then why do we need film incentives? Well, the Kansas film industry is struggling to grow past where it currently is. The kind of spending required for large scale productions isn't feasible in Kansas, as it currently stands. Over thirty seven other states and cities have policies in place to make them competitive in the film market. Kansas is neighbored by three states that have implemented film incentive programs, and Missouri is on the precipice of passing their own version soon.

Small businesses like mine, the people who work in this industry, and the people of the state of Kansas stand to benefit extraordinarily from the provisions in this bill that require film-incentivized productions to use Kansas based vendors, hire local crew, and spend money in the state to qualify for the tax credits. We have a labor force here in Kansas that is highly regarded all over the country. Every time I hear from clients about their experience working here, time and time again they rave about how good the people are, how easy it is to collaborate with them and how hard everyone works. Out of state production companies keep returning here to Kansas because of the people in this industry. But the reality is that even though we have all these qualified, hard working people here in Kansas, the competing states offer incentives and we don't. Therefore, we are never really in consideration for the bigger jobs. Like it or not, incentives in other states are not going away on their own, the overall

number of states with them may flux over time, but at the end of the day, a state must have some sort of incentive package to compete for the kind of spending that these productions are bringing to the table.

Aside from my roles with Grow Kansas Film and as a business owner, I often work as a freelancer. To use film-industry terms, I work as a “Gaffer”- managing lighting and electrical distribution on set, or as a “Grip”, setting up the rigs that hold the lights and cameras, and keeping the talent and crew safe. The majority of people working in film are not directors, or producers, or anyone from Hollywood– we are regular, hardworking, blue collar people. Gaffers, Grips, Camera Operators, Audio Technicians, Production Assistants, and countless other Kansans who are passionate about working on set.

These are physically challenging, laborious professions– often working 16 hour days. We do this to help produce high quality, creative content that ultimately ends up on all of our screens. We do this because we truly love the work. Unfortunately, many of our talented people are pulled out of our state as they head to Oklahoma, Louisiana, or Colorado to go where the work is– sometimes temporarily or sometimes they stay.

There is a term called “film friendly” environments. It usually refers to how receptive a location like a bar or restaurant is to having a production shoot there. It can also apply to states, cities and towns. Today, I stand before you on behalf of the working people and small businesses in the state of Kansas, and ask that you make Kansas a “film friendly” environment by supporting Senate Bill 91.

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