

BUSINESS OF FILM

Film productions boost small-town housing, tourism as they spend



Andrew Lincoln as Rick Grimes in "The Walking Dead," Season 9, filmed in Senoia, Ga.

SPECIAL/JACKSON LEE DAVIS, AMC

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Contributing Writer

The burgeoning film and television production business is having a big impact on small Georgia towns.

"You leave cosmopolitan Atlanta and go out to Senoia, Covington or Conyers and enter the world that some of these filmmakers are looking for," said **Craig Dominey**, senior film location specialist for the **Georgia Film Office** and manager of the state's Camera Ready program

which fields liaisons in all 159 Georgia counties.

The towns of Senoia, home to AMC's post-apocalyptic horror hit "The Walking Dead," and Barnesville, which was the set location for HBO's drama miniseries "Sharp Objects," are two prime examples. While their stories are very different, each illustrates the kind of economic short- and long-term ripple effects possible thanks to state incentives to bring film business to Georgia. These effects were slated to be discussed by a panel at

Atlanta Business Chronicle's The Business of Film event on Dec. 6.

Barnesville landed as the production location for "Sharp Objects" after HBO scouts drove through on their way to a different location. In the end, they liked Barnesville best for its look and proximity, just over an hour's drive from Atlanta.

"Sharp Objects," which starred actress Amy Adams and transformed Barnesville, Ga., into Wind Gap, Mo., contributed over \$500,000 and a 10 percent boost in tax revenue to the local economy during

its production in June and July of 2017, reported **Kathy Oxford**, executive director of the **Barnesville-Lamar Industrial Development Authority** and the Lamar County liaison for the Camera Ready program.

The town benefited from a gamut of production expenditures that included property rentals, purchases from local antique and thrift shops, compensation to downtown businesses whose windows

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▶ ECONOMIC RIPPLES FROM GEORGIA PRODUCTIONS

- ▶ "Sharp Objects" contributed \$500,000 plus 10% increase in tax revenue during two months of production in 2017.
- ▶ "The Walking Dead" spends \$60 million - \$70 million annually for production.
- ▶ "Walking Dead" is Senoia's 24th film or TV production.
- ▶ Since 2003, Senoia's Main Street has grown from five businesses to 85.
- ▶ In 2000s, Senoia was in negative growth curve - now population has more than doubled to 4,000 since 2000 census. Currently 2,000 new home lots are in development.
- ▶ 250 "Walking Dead" cast and crew film 16 episodes per season, eight months per year. The show just completed shooting its ninth season.
- ▶ 24,000 room nights were booked at a Peachtree City hotel when "Ant Man" was filmed at Pinewood Atlanta Studios.
- ▶ 150,000 tourists visit the Woodbury Shoppe annually.

- ▶ Juliette, Georgia, where "Whistle Stop" was filmed still gets about 50,000 tourists a year.

Sources: **Kathy Oxford**, Barnesville-Lamar Industrial Development Authority; **Scott Tigchelaar**, Senoia Enterprises Inc.

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SPECIAL/JOHNNY CAIN

Kathy Oxford



SPECIAL

Niki Sappington

were painted, and even use of a college parking lot for the huge production trucks. A local artist who painted the now-permanent murals around the town "did very well," said Oxford, who was slated to take part in the "Ripple Effect" panel discussion Dec. 6.

One positive effect, said **Niki Sappington**, **Barnesville's** director of community development, was how vibrant the town became with locals who came out to shop and eat and see what was going

on. A Facebook page provided production news. Sappington was also scheduled to join the panel discussion.

Surrounding towns can also be winners. McDonough, for example, provided the hotel rooms for the "Sharp Objects" cast, crew and visitors. And when "Ant Man" was shot at **Pinewood Atlanta Studios** in Fayetteville, the production booked 24,000 room nights in one hotel alone in Peachtree City, according to **Scott Tigchelaar**, president of **Senoia Enterprises Inc.**

"The Walking Dead," which just completed its ninth season, spends between \$60 million and \$70 million on production per year with local expenses on everything from location fees and food to building supplies. When constructing a prison set, for example, the show brought in steel by the truckloads and used 30 welders, said Tigchelaar, another slated panelist.



SPECIAL

Scott Tigchelaar

The 250 cast and crew who work on the show eight months of the year also spend locally on everything from housing to banking and dry cleaning.

Even real estate and development have surged. In 2017, AMC purchased **Riverwood Studios**, which "Walking Dead" has used since it came to Senoia in 2011 for more than \$8 million. The company has also built 10 actual homes in the neighborhood which serves as one of the working sets. And, according to Tigchelaar, 2,000 new home lots around town are currently in development.

Beyond jobs and investments, the booming film business has created a thriving film tourism industry, according to the Georgia Film Office.

Though "Sharp Objects" premiered just a few months ago, Barnesville hopes to promote show tourism through

a fan web page and a walking tour brochure featuring a dozen points of interest, including two of the Wind Gap murals where they hope visitors will take selfies.

In Senoia, while it's almost impossible to quantify, says Tigchelaar, the effects of production and tourism for a long-running show like "The Walking Dead" are far-reaching.

Since 2006, when Tigchelaar began investing in then economically down-trodden Senoia to revive its potential for the film business, and especially after the arrival of "The Walking Dead," the town's main street has gone from five to 85 businesses. That includes restaurants and shops, as well as tourist attractions

that Tigchelaar, Robert Kirkman (creator of the comic book series the show is based on) and other investors opened: a Walking Dead-themed coffee shop, museum, and the Woodbury Shoppe, a merchandise retailer that Tigchelaar says attracts 150,000 visitors each year.

"Tourism is the biggest ripple that was never factored into the economic analysis of the (2008 film industry) incentive. It's off the charts," Tigchelaar said.

"Walking Dead" Executive Producer **Tom Luse** announced AMC plans to enhance the town's tourism experience to "give fans a chance to see behind the veil" with exclusive tours of the studio as well as major sets like the hilltop and Alexandria Safe Zone.



SPECIAL

Tom Luse

According to Luse, the show and the town benefit from each other. "It's a really good relationship. It's all about how we work together," he said. "We believe if we are approaching things in a positive light with the local community, we'll maintain something that will grow."

For its part, Barnesville is expanding its marketing and maintaining industry relationships to attract a new production.

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