



TV series Fargo putting Alberta's film industry in the spotlight

By [Bill Kaufmann](#), *Calgary Sun* First posted: Monday, March 31, 2014 01:52 PM MDT | Updated: Monday, March 31, 2014 02:11 PM MDT

Fargo filming in Calgary



Director Scott Winant (C) directs his crew during a scene on the set of the new "Fargo" TV series in Calgary, Alberta, March 11, 2014. A particularly punishing winter, even by Canadian standards, has served well the new cable television series "Fargo," a reimagining of the blood-soaked black comedy film of the same name by brothers Joel and Ethan Coen. The 10-episode single-season series, which debuts on April 15 on Twenty-First Century Fox Inc's cable network, is a new story with different characters, but leans heavily on the frigid Minnesota setting, death, Midwestern folksiness and deadpan humor of its Oscar-winning namesake. Picture taken March 11, 2014. REUTERS/Todd Korol

The deserted, rusting Bridgeland long term care centre was only the latest shooting location stop for the TV show Fargo.

Above it flies the Stars and Stripes, and a coat of arms bearing Paul Bunyan and Babe the bull festoons walls and windows to render it a Minnesota police station and hospital.

It seems an effective enough scene for the Coen brothers-inspired, 10-episode FXX series but the show's producer, Chad Oakes said it's symptomatic of the need of a \$22.8 million film and TV studio apparently on its way for Calgary.

"Right now, we're renting airplane hangars and warehouse space, retrofitting and usually not using the same one twice," said Oakes, whose Calgary-based Nomadic Pictures also produces 19th century railroad drama Hell on Wheels in the area.

"Every time we retrofit, we put up \$50,000 or \$100,000."

Film creators, he says, expend time and energy scrambling for warehouse space in short supply for seven months' use in a booming city.

A permanent, tailor-made film space would not only bring convenience but ultimately shave costs, said Oakes.

It would also send a signal to established film-making centres, he said, that Calgary's moved up to into a new league.

"Having a studio complex shows Los Angeles and New York that we're serious," he said.

"Film is arts and culture but there's the word 'business' -- it's important to show sustainability and a foundation."

As he speaks, a small army of local production crew members hustles equipment through nearby hallways of the grubby hospital, preparing for the next scene.

The professionalism of those crews have become a draw for Hollywood productions and would find a more stable base for their craft in a new studio complex, say its proponents.

Taking a break between Fargo shoots, British actor Martin Freeman, who also played Bilbo Baggins in the movie The Hobbit, speaks of the Calgary crews' efficiency.

"I've never worked this quickly -- an hour of TV in seven days," said Freeman.

Fellow Fargo actor Allison Tolman said that while southern Alberta's long been known for its varied, stunning scenery. its film-making reputations has more recently broadened.

"Now we have this amazing basis of a crew, they know each other, they work together," said the Texas native.

So far, \$5 million in provincial money's been earmarked for the \$23 million studio that's been considerably scaled back from original designs.

It now calls for an 83,000 sq.-ft. complex with two sound stages, warehouse and administration space -- enough to provide infrastructure for 4-5,000 crew members, say those behind it.

The hope is to have it up and running by the summer of 2015.

Standing amid the organized chaos of the Fargo film set that suddenly falls silent when the cameras roll, Calgary's film commissioner, Luke Azevedo said it's a familiar place for him.

"I'm usually here at the beginning, middle and end of a shoot...it's been a long production and should be a great piece to showcase Alberta," said Azevedo.

A few weeks later, he's on the phone from Los Angeles where he's attending studio meetings and a film location expo where he's trumpeting Alberta's charms.

The prospect of a film studio gives him something more to talk about in Tinseltown, though firm commitments of film projects aren't likely until there are shovels in the ground, said Azevedo.

"It's positive news and puts a bit of a spotlight on Alberta," he said.

The number of prospective locations for the facility have been narrowed down from four to one, a site Azevedo won't divulge, he said, in order to protect ongoing negotiations.

He insists a business plan foresees a sustainable facility but one that requires government investment to get off the ground.

"If you look at the workload here right now, it's already oversubscribed but this studio would also allow us to elongate the production season," he says of the current six-month weather window.

Once it's built, said Azevedo, they will come but its operators will then be confronted with the challenge of balancing its use between local and out-of-province producers.

But it should more realistically tilt filmmaking in the province, he added, noting Edmonton's had a smaller studio facility for years.

"Eighty percent of production is done in southern Alberta, but the entire province has to have success," he said.

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