

Portlandbiz

New studio to lure filmmakers

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08/25/09



Laurie Notch (right), president of Wasted Minds Media Group, helped launch The Maine Studios in Portland, the state's largest production studio for the visual arts

Maine's largest production studio held its grand opening this morning in Portland. The Maine Studios is 43,000 square feet of production and office space spread over three warehouses that proponents hope will spur the growth of Maine's burgeoning film industry.

Laurie Notch, president of Portland-based Wasted Minds Media Group, spearheaded the launch of the studio space. She told *Mainebiz* the space will be available for what she calls "the multimedia arts" -- which she describes as any type of production from feature films to commercials to music performance arts. The studios will also be the home to the nonprofit Maine Film Co-Op, which will be launched next month to support, financially and otherwise, Maine's film industry. Notch says there are hundreds of talented filmmakers in the state, as well as a great film studies program, but there aren't really any production studios in Maine. "We're trying to be a hub for the creative community, especially with the entertainment and visual and audio media," Notch says. "We're trying to create the proper infrastructure that has been lacking in Maine."

According to [a 2008 report commissioned by the Maine Film Office](#), the visual media industry in Maine had an economic impact in 2005 (the most recent data available) of \$630 million, including direct, indirect and induced spending, and employed 2,113 people. The report also found that for each \$1 million spent in Maine by out-of-state production companies, about \$150,000 in state and local government revenues are generated.

Notch says the issue is attracting those investors to spend that money. The state is lacking two things, she says: incentives and infrastructure. The hope is The Maine Studios and the Maine Film Co-Op will solve the latter. "Build it and they will come -- that's really what we're doing," she says. "It's the 'Field of Dreams'."

Wasted Minds Media Group, which Notch founded in June 2008, has been in the building three weeks and still needs a lot of work before it's ready for the next "Empire Falls," but once complete, Notch says it will be a "one-stop shopping production center" that will offer everything a filmmaker or visual artists needs to shepherd a project from pre- to post-production, including studio and office space and equipment rentals. The rents on the space will be the endeavor's "bread and butter," she says. Notch says a production studio is basically a factory ("It's like building cars ... maybe a little more glamorous") and once products are being made, the revenue will start coming in.

Building that foundation is crucial, she says. In her role as president of Wasted Minds Media Group, Notch says she talks to financiers from Hollywood and New York all the time. Having something like The Maine Studios will be a great card to play in those talks. "We're not out in the Wild West anymore -- it's bricks and mortar now," she says, demonstrating what fodder Maine filmmakers could offer in future talks with investors. "This is real. We're not just pulling it out of our behinds. You really should invest in us."

The irony is that The Maine Studios was born from unwelcome news for the local film industry. Earlier this year, a bill in the Legislature that would have increased tax incentives for filmmakers to make their movies in Maine was tabled. Notch says she had four projects lined up with financial backers in the wings waiting for the legislation to pass. When the bill was tabled indefinitely, killing the hope of tax incentives, the projects fell through. "We lost \$20 million in one day," she says, adding that the projects were moved to Connecticut, Michigan and Florida. Because Wasted Minds Media Group had those big projects lined up, the company had begun looking at production space and was introduced to Nappi Distributors, which owns the warehouse space, through the commercial real estate brokerage NAI The Dunham Group. The Nappi family is "so intrigued by this industry" they offered the space rent-free for now. Once the studios start bringing in renters, the rent will go up on a graduated scale over three years. To repay the Nappis' kindness, Notch says she'll give the family an executive producer credit when a big production gets made in the space.

Wasted Minds Media Group is just a small part of the project, Notch says. Right now, in addition to the space being temporarily donated rent-free by Nappi Distributors, other companies have donated cleaning services, engineers have donated their time, people are coming in with supplies. "It's like a barn raising right now," Notch says.

Notch says despite the tabling of the bill earlier this year, Augusta has been supportive. As evidence, she notes that Gov. John Baldacci joined the nearly 200 people at the opening to cut the ceremonial 16mm film-cum-ribbon to mark the event. During the opening, Baldacci noted he had never seen so many legislators in one place outside Augusta. Notch says it's a sign that lawmakers are supportive and want to help. "If the state sees us making that kind of effort, they're going to find a way to help us financially."

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