

TO: HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
FROM: CHAD ERVIN, VERMONT PRODUCTION COLLECTIVE
DATE: 04/06/2023
RE: H.434 OFFICE OF FILM AND CREATIVE MEDIA

Thank you Chairman Marcotte and members of the committee, it is an honor and pleasure to speak with you today. My name is Chad Ervin, I am the President of the Board of Directors of the Vermont Production Collective, a non-profit organization created to support established and aspiring film and media professionals in the state.

Before I talk about what we do at VPC and how that relates to the aspirations of H.434 I want to take a moment to underscore why the film & media industries are relevant to commerce and economic development, because alas, that's the committee we find ourselves in.

At the second Film & Media Taskforce listening session a speaker from the Buffalo Niagara Film Office pointed out that promoting film & media jobs is often thought of as falling under the 'arts' when it is just as much a workforce development issue. And not just workforce development for our sector alone, because the creative media industry is an accelerant for economic activity and growth across all sectors. Any business seeking to scale, any non-profit running a capital campaign, a high tech start-up, or a brick and mortar downtown business, benefits from engaging in a compelling way with an audience that is increasingly having its first point of contact with a business or brand online. Whether on a website or social media - video, podcasts, photography, media content is a baseline component for appearing professional online and it also creates a way to connect with potential customers or donors in a more effective and personalizing way. A thriving media economy helps businesses scale, organically bolsters brand identity and promotion for the state, and could foster wage growth, increasing quality of life for current and potential residents.

Vermont Production Collective was founded in 2020 by a group of film & media professionals in response to our struggles to find collaborators within the state. Though there are many thriving pockets of innovation, support, and connection these groups are disconnected from a larger statewide network depriving them opportunities for cross-pollination, mentorship, and undertaking more ambitious projects. We also felt that there was a lack of awareness of the high quality work that is currently taking place. On Instagram we share and celebrate work done in the state and spread awareness of events and resources of interest. We created a private Facebook group used by Vermonters to find collaborators or employees, for students seeking internships, and for people to buy and sell unneeded equipment.

One of the first tasks that we undertook, which continues today, is a 'listening tour,' reaching out to others in the industry and having a conversation about their work and creative interests, as well as their struggles and frustrations.

The challenges shared almost unanimously among everyone fit into a few categories: lack of a central point of contact or online database, whether for an external source - someone looking to come to the state to film - or for people within the state, seeking information, support, and

resources, or to meet others in the industry. Another common concern is the lack of any sort of incentive program, which would be a benefit to local professionals as well as outside entities coming here to work. Finally, many are frustrated by a lack of infrastructure such as studio locations and equipment rentals, and onerous and inconsistently enforced regulations on the use of 1099 contractors, which is the lifeblood of the film & media industry - the notion that an actor or crew for a commercial should be hired as a W2 employee is financially burdensome and disincentivizes work.

H.434 as introduced seeks to make progress on most of these challenges, and if implemented correctly could begin to make progress on the others by beginning dialogue and research, which is encouraging. However, many locals in the industry do remain skeptical of a legislative solution for a variety of reasons. Some are dubious that any actions will actually come to fruition, due to negative experiences following the dissolution of the film commission and subsequent Office of the Creative Economy. Others feel that any legislation should cement a film incentive program in the bill, or feel that a re-establishment of the former film commission would be preferable.

In the long run we feel it will probably be more beneficial to have an agency not located inside the state government, such as how H.434 is structured with the proposed changes. This way, the Office of Film and Creative Media would be able to respond with more agility to requests and concerns, field calls from interested filmmakers from outside the state, maintain close connections to local working professionals, be more open to the potential posed by emerging technologies and mediums of communication, work hand-in-hand with local universities and career centers to create a pipeline into the industry, and be able to target less location-specific jobs in the industry such as post-production, animation, and gaming design.

Making progress in this sector can be done at relatively low expense, too often in the past it seems like 'perfect' has gotten in the way of good and prevented any sort of gains.

I always say more people hop on a bandwagon when it's moving. We have hosted networking and panel discussion events throughout the state, are developing a Vermont screenplay incubator, and are looking to serve as fiscal sponsors for local projects. There are multiple plans to create studio space which would double as an educational resource as well as being available for rental. There are many projects percolating in the state, from bare-bones passion projects to a 23-million dollar deal with a major streamer. Next week we're talking to a location scout who sees Vermont as an ideal location to film car commercials, and someone else who grew up here in Vermont and caught the filmmaking bug working on a film set here and is now producing major film and television series in New York and wants to support industry growth here. We even heard from a filmmaking team in New York that has decided to film in Vermont, convinced by the level of creative activity they have seen on our Instagram. The opportunity is here, enthusiasm is high, we just need the organization and infrastructure to support it, let's get this bandwagon rolling.

Thank you for your interest in supporting the film and creative media industries and for the opportunity to speak with you today.