

Testimonies delivered to DC City Council in support of local film initiatives (2011-2017)
by Lance Kramer, executive director/co-founder, Meridian Hill Pictures
www.meridianhillpictures.com

NOVEMBER 2011

When I decided to start a production company with my brother, I realized it was not Hollywood or the Big Apple that held the greatest opportunity for us. Like my grandfather and great-grandfather before me, I decided I would start a business in the District of Columbia. In 2010, with my brother, we established our documentary production company here in the District, called Meridian Hill Pictures.

It's no mistake that as our city's traditional hard-industries have dwindled, what has emerged is an unparalleled community and economy based on the intellectual, artistic and creative capacity of our population. WAMU's slogan: "The Mind is our Medium," could not be any more appropriate for the District. This is a cerebral city, a thinking person's place where meaningful discourse and dialogue drive decisions and problem solving at every level.

In this spirit, our media makers in the District are unique because we are driven to tell stories that matter.

Collectively, the thousands of individuals, students & enterprises who create films, video, television shows, radio shows, magazines, newspapers, podcasts and tweets, form one of the strongest creative economies in the nation. This is one of our city's greatest and most precious economic and cultural assets.

We are correct to identify that these kinds of projects possess the ability to provide substantial economic benefits and employment opportunities for District residents. However, as a District resident, taxpayer, small business owner, and filmmaker myself, I feel the proposed Amendment advances far too narrow an understanding of how to stimulate our local creative economy. While I agree that attracting outside talent and investment is an important ingredient in any reform, the proposed Amendment bends far too favorably toward so-called 'out of town' visitors and resources, missing a key opportunity to cultivate and sustain the film & media-making community who choose to make the District their long-term home.

Hollywood has built a multi-billion dollar industry out of telling often-fictional stories. Here in the District, we have built a substantial industry out of telling raw and honest stories drawn from real-life issues, stories that don't require special effects and makeup. I firmly believe that audiences are just as thirsty for these kinds of stories as they are for the latest 3-D adventure. And I am deeply concerned that in the pursuit of attracting more glamorous resources from afar, the stories of greatest relevance to our own residents may be drowned out.

I intend to continue doing what I hope is good and important work here in the District of Columbia. I intend to continue growing my business and my career as a filmmaker here in the District of Columbia. I intend to continue creating jobs, creating tax revenue, and creating positive economic and social impact, here in the District of Columbia. There are many others like me. And we could have a lot more. I ask that as you consider creative new ways to stimulate film production within our borders, please don't forget our city's own media makers and storytellers.

MAY 2012

When I came to the Wilson building back in November 2011 to speak on this issue, I urged the Council to not to forget the City's tremendous and robust "creative economy," the talented film professionals who actually live and work in the District. We are a collection of some 10% of the city's workforce, accounting for an estimated \$5 billion of the City's income annually, of which about 40% of that is within media and communications. I urged the Council to keep in mind that the culture of media creation here is somewhat different than that in other cities. We're all storytellers no matter the zip code, but here in DC, in the shadows of the Smithsonian, National Geographic, Discovery, the National Archives, the Library of Congress and other institutions of knowledge, influence and governance, filmmakers here have created a unique identity and culture. Projects are often non-fiction rather than fictional, and filmmakers themselves are drawn to create media that matters, analyzing, documenting and sharing stories of importance to our daily lives. In November, I urged the Council to consider actions that would nurture, cultivate and encourage the growth of this local creative economy in ways that had District residents, and the unique culture of our city, in mind. Unfortunately, six months later, I am remiss to say the dialogue is still missing the mark, when it comes to serving the local DC filmmaking community.

As media makers and storytellers, we constantly ask ourselves, "who is our audience?" and "Will our work connect with them?" If we apply that same reasoning to this bill, I am left to ask myself, "who is this bill directed at?" If the audience were actually DC filmmakers, provisions in the bill might include some different ideas. The bill might include a set of incentives for projects falling under a \$500,000 budget, as many DC-based independent film and video projects have budgets less than \$500,000. A bill aimed at the DC film community might have incentives for established DC film companies to retain, hire and attract more District residents as employees. It might have incentives to create new office, studio and incubator spaces to support independent filmmakers trying to start new film enterprises in the city. A bill might include increased incentives for theatres, film festivals and non-profit organizations that highlight and support the local filmmaking community everyday. And a bill for the DC film community might have incentives for students from any one of our city's fantastic universities to stay in the District after graduation and begin their careers here, in the DC film industry.

Instead, when I read the bill and its proposed changes, I have to question whether the bill's audience is largely out-of-town producers and companies. If this is the audience, it seems that the bill doesn't even know that audience all that well. Because it's questionable how much impact \$1.6 million can really achieve, particularly when spread across multiple big-budget feature films costing tens or hundreds of millions of dollars a piece. In comparison, many DC filmmakers are kind of scrappy, we're used to working on a shoestring to make it happen. For DC filmmakers, we know how to stretch a dollar. We constantly think about how to leverage the greatest impact from a pool of limited resources. Even a few thousand dollars can make or break a project. In Hollywood, the financial figures we're discussing can amount to little more than a rounding error. Not likely something that will really influence a producer's decision whether to film in DC versus another city that's attempting to woo them.

My point here is not to position local filmmakers at odds with our Hollywood or New York colleagues. We need all of these forces to survive and thrive. Smart policy just requires a balance and understanding the needs of all stakeholders. Ideas for how to make truly meaningful changes have been well studied and documented. I would strongly encourage you to re-read the "Creative DC Action Agenda" published by the DC Office of Planning in 2010. There are so many ideas already on the table for how game-changing reforms can be made. Let's get back to the drawing boards and figure out how to work some of these ideas into new reforms.

The Council should be commended for your exploration film incentives as a catalyst for meaningful economic and cultural impact. If designed and implemented wisely, there's a real opportunity build something great here in the District. We want to work with you on this. And we truly hope that you will be our partner in advancing the world-class DC film community and economy.

MAY 2014

When you meet someone new in this town, chances are, one of the first questions they will ask you is — “what do you do?” When I answer, “I’m a filmmaker,” I often get the response, “I didn’t realize we had filmmakers in DC.” We are here, we are creating excellent work, we are building a community and a vibrant creative economy, and we are often doing it on our own. This is the third time I’ve visited the council to testify on this matter and I’m sorry to say that the language of the proposed amendment feels as though we are taking steps backward.

A sound policy would not just consider how to attract out-of-town projects and productions for a short visit, but also focus on how to support the local filmmakers and companies who are living and working here everyday as contributing members of the DC economy. There are thousands of us working as filmmakers in the District every day. We pay taxes here, we raise families here, we employ other District residents, and often we make films that improve the quality of life here in the District. For almost all of us who are working filmmakers in the District, these proposed incentives will effectively have zero impact on our work.

For example, our whole yearly operating budget for **our entire production company** is about \$225,000 — that’s one half the budget threshold for the proposed incentives. With \$225,000, our production company employs four District residents as yearly salaried staff, approximately 20 District residents as freelance/project-based crew, and an average of 12 District university students or recent graduates per year through a paid internship program. In our four years of operation, almost 100 people and DC companies in the industry have received paychecks from Meridian Hill Pictures for playing a part in making films in the District. These are projects created to raise marginalized voices and improving living conditions in our city. Our films have shared the stories of residents east of the Anacostia River who have been impacted by job training programs, residents with mental illness at Saint Elizabeths, District residents struggling with homelessness, teen mothers and fathers, innovative DCPS teachers, senior citizens in Fort Lincoln, and entrepreneurs running small family-run businesses. Every year, we are able to make all of this happen, for less than half of the minimum threshold proposed in this amendment.

Our economic footprint may be small compared to a large out of town production, but I’m proud to say that we are not alone and we are one small part of thousands of other working film professionals in the city. Collectively, we occupy and create jobs that cannot be outsourced out of town or overseas. We are a community that supports one-another and believe that a rising tide raises all ships. As filmmakers already struggling just to make our projects and payroll happen, we cannot do this on our own. We need help from the Council and DC Film Office to stimulate the local economy by supporting initiatives that make it easier for DC-based producers and production companies to make movies in the District with DC-based talent. There are already great ideas on the table, like:

- Incentivizing DC-based film, video and media companies to hire District residents **as salaried staff**
- Equipping, incentivizing and supporting DC-based film, video and media companies to train emerging students and talent through **internships, apprenticeships and mentorship**
- Incentivizing/highlighting film, video and new media projects by DC filmmakers made **under a \$500,000 budget**
- **Creating film-specific grants** or funding opportunities for DC filmmakers, beyond broader arts grants offered through the Commission or DC Humanities Council

These conversations are critical because if we take the wrong action, we don’t just stand to lose good projects — we stand to lose good people. Great films do not happen without great people and great ideas. Incentives that only consider the project — and not the creative people who make it possible — are missing this major part of the puzzle. The DC Office of Motion Picture & Television Development has a number of excellent ideas on the table that can work constructively to address these issues. They just need your help. Forward-thinking action from the Council can help more District residents answer the question: “what do you do” with the reply, “I’m a filmmaker — in Washington, DC.”

FEBRUARY 2017

As 4th generation Washingtonians, my brother and I have long held a deep passion for this city. When we started MHP in 2010, we wanted to create a place to tell honest, people-centered stories through documentary film. We also wanted to figure out how to build a career making films in this city we love — without having to move to New York or LA to get a job.

DC is known for its excellence in documentary filmmaking, a unique art form that requires a great deal of time, money, talent, and relationships. With its strengths, the independent documentary filmmaking community also faces a number of struggles, particularly when it comes to maintaining year-round salaried positions (as opposed to hiring freelance project-based crew), and a lack of job training, internships, and apprenticeship opportunities for our field, particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Along with other local filmmakers, I have testified on these issues several times over the past decade. During these last two years, I have been impressed with the way the Council and OCTFME have stepped up to take meaningful steps to address these issues and bolster our segment of the creative economy.

Several new and revised programs launched since 2015 are making it markedly easier for producers and production companies to make independent documentary films in the District. Last fall we released *City of Trees*, a story about a green job training program started during the recession to put long-term unemployed District residents back to work through planting trees and taking care of parks East of the Anacostia River. The film delves into nuanced and complex human conflicts, raising hard questions about environmental justice, race, and community power dynamics. *City of Trees* has played in more than two dozen film festivals nationally and internationally, was broadcast on the PBS series *America ReFramed*, is in distribution with Cinema Guild to K-12 schools and universities, and will soon be launched on video on demand, facilitating important dialogues across the city and across the world.

City of Trees took five years to make and cost a total of \$406,000. Though small by most feature-length film budget standards, for us, *City of Trees* was a major project and undertaking, employing a total of 5 District residents as full-time filmmakers and 27 District residents as part-time and temporary hires. Under the previous guidelines, our film would not have been eligible for a production rebate. Thanks to revisions that lowered the eligible budget from \$500,000 to \$250,000, independent documentary films like *City of Trees* are now eligible. The rebate made a major impact, allowing us to reinvest funds into our production company to retain and grow our current staff and gear up for our next film.

OCTFME has also demonstrated commendable leadership in strengthening pathways for underserved community members to enter the field. This fall, we were fortunate to become one of the introductory employer partners in the new CECAP program, hosting Kenya Raymond as a member of our team. For Kenya, having this kind of introductory first step in the field may not be possible without a program like CECAP. These kinds of programs are helping build toward more diversity in the field. Other initiatives like the Filmmaker of the Month program, sponsorship of local screenings, Movie Mondays, and social media promotion, have also all done a great deal to raise visibility of local independent filmmakers who may otherwise struggle with receiving attention for our work absent substantial promotional resources.

The entire team at OCTFME — led by Angie Gates and Herbert Niles — should be commended for the way they listen to their stakeholders and sensitively design programs and offer support to advance independent filmmaking in the District. Thanks to the work and innovation at OCTFME, cities and states across the country are paying attention to DC in an elevated way. At national film conferences I have attended recently, people are regularly asking how their cities can replicate DC's successful models for advancing their local film economies through rebate programs and diversifying their respective workforces through programs like CECAP. OCTFME has made great strides in the past two years, but there is much more work to be done. I hope that the Council continues to support the critical and vital work at OCTFME. As we try to push the field to be more sustainable, equitable, and advance the exploding talent pool of people building lives and careers in this art form in DC, OCTFME's role is vital in advancing excellence in the artwork and the economics that drive the creative process.