



Film Tourism Prompts Rebirth of a Southern City

SITUATION

In 1996, the outlook in Senoia, Georgia was bleak. Over the prior decade, the town had made a name for itself as a quaint and diverse film production location, with Riverwood Studios acting as a production hub. But by 1996 Riverwood was all but vacant, a physical embodiment of what essentially left Senoia a ghost town.

Such notable movies as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Driving Miss Daisy*, which had been filmed in and around Senoia, were left as part of the town's history. International tax credits and a strengthening global economy gave birth to the term "runaway production" and ensured such projects wouldn't be part of Senoia's foreseeable future.

By 2002, there were five viable, but not flourishing, businesses on Senoia's Main Street. The film industry had moved on, the town was on life support, and the economy desperately needed a boost.

IMPLEMENTATION

The state of Georgia decided to take action - not just for Senoia, but also for the entire state. The first film-related tax incentive was introduced in 2002. The state's second and most competitive and aggressive tax incentive, the Georgia Entertainment Industry Investment Act, was signed into law in May 2005 and updated in May 2008. The act granted qualified productions a transferable income tax credit of 20 percent of all in-state costs for film and television investments of \$500,000 or more. In addition, a 10 percent Georgia Entertainment Promotion (GEP) uplift can be earned by including an embedded Georgia logo on approved projects and a link to TourGeorgiaFilm.com on the promotional website. This progressive program caught the attention of the AMC network, which saw Senoia as the perfect home for its newly announced production, *The Walking Dead*.

Location:

Senoia, Georgia

FY15 (July 1, 2014 — June 30, 2015)

- Georgia-lensed productions generated a record-breaking economic impact of \$6 billion.
- Georgia also saw record investment from film and television productions with more than \$1.7 billion in direct spending in the state.
- According to the Motion Picture Association of America, the film and television industry is responsible for more than 79,000 jobs and roughly \$4 billion in total wages in Georgia. These are high-quality jobs, with an average salary of nearly \$84,000, 75 percent higher than the average salary nationwide.

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According to Scott Tigchelaar, President of Senoia Enterprises and Raleigh Studios, “A television series like *The Walking Dead* probably spends \$50 million per year on their show. That’s \$50 million that’s being spent in Georgia and not somewhere else.”

Poetically, it took the undead to breathe new life into Senoia.

RESULTS

AMC’s top-rated show quickly built a following, and Senoia was officially back on the map. As is often the case with popular productions, filming locations become hot destinations for tourists looking for a glimpse into their favorite movies and television shows. Fortunately for Senoia, *The Walking Dead*’s fan base is passionate, loyal and eager to visit their favorite show’s real-life locations.

“When AMC came looking for a location, we immediately recognized how vitally important finding the right match would be for both the production and the location. When we looked at the options, we found a combination of a strategically good location, a rich history in film production, and the right mix of incentives, putting Senoia squarely at the top of the list,” said Lee Thomas, Deputy Commissioner of Georgia’s Film, Music & Digital Entertainment division.

With film tourism came prosperity and a growing sense of pride in Senoia. Restaurants, shops and other businesses moved to downtown Senoia, and today Main Street boasts more than 50 businesses. Only a few of those businesses are directly related to the zombie cottage industry created by *The Walking Dead*; the others are there as a result of the growing economy that film and film tourism has brought to Senoia. Zac Brown of The Zac Brown Band even opened a restaurant and live music venue on Main Street.

“There are two businesses in town that are directly related to the hit series: a *Walking Dead* gift shop and the *Walking Dead* coffee shop,” explains Tigchelaar. “Those are definitely tourist attractions, but all the other businesses on Main Street are doctors and lawyers, insurance agents and restaurants, and similar types of traditional businesses you’d find in any thriving town. They’ve all come to the downtown hub. The film industry was the catalyst for the growth; film tourism ensures that growth is healthy and sustainable. It’s business that begets business; it’s activity that begets activity.”

“Senoia has become a shining example of what Georgia’s film tax incentives were designed to do. Tour companies run full buses and walking tours through the area; *The Walking Dead* fans fly in from across the world to see Senoia, and they spend their dollars in Senoia and in Georgia,” added Thomas. “And while *The Walking Dead* is the main attraction, other local businesses also benefit, from grocery stores to hotels to small shops and boutiques. It’s driving economic development through film.”

In the midst of the excitement around film production, Senoia was twice chosen as the location for Southern Living magazine’s Idea House, in 2010 and 2012. This further solidified Senoia’s footing as a charming and traditional southern town, and it helped to prompt significant real estate investment in and around the area.

The benefits have real world dividends. “Thanks to Georgia’s film tax incentives, and to our strategic partnerships with studios and productions, we’re successfully reviving once languishing regions in the state. Senoia today is a bustling town with a strong economy, a healthy business landscape, a vibrant real estate market, and a growing population,” noted Thomas. “That’s exactly what we set out to do.”