

Investors Pursuing New Deal For Film Studio In Stratford

By ERIC GERSHON

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In early 2008, Allen Christopher was touting the plans of a partnership called Hollywood East/Area 51 to convert an abandoned Army engine plant in Stratford into a movie studio with 30 soundstages.

More than 18 months later, that project remains in limbo after the partnership splintered amid a dispute between Christopher and other partners that led to a bitter lawsuit and his departure from the project.

Christopher, a former television writer and producer, announced Tuesday that he and a smaller group of investors have reached a deal to buy a former ExxonMobil polypropylene film factory — also in Stratford. They plan to transform it into a smaller-scale film studio and open for business early next year.

Since 2006, when Connecticut began offering film tax credits of up to 30 percent, developers have been racing to open production facilities throughout the state. Several already operate in Norwalk and Stamford. Others are in planning or early development stages in Windsor and South Windsor.

"Right now there's a need for more soundstages," said Kevin Segalla, a co-founder of the Connecticut Production Coalition, which advocates for the state's emerging film industry. "If every single project gets built, then we'll probably have sufficient soundstages to take us into the future."

Segalla is also president of the Connecticut Film Center, a business that operates production facilities in Fairfield County.

Christopher's new partnership, DMG Studio Holdings LLC, expects to close on its real estate deal in January. He would not disclose the purchase price, but said DMG expects to spend \$20 million to develop its studios over the next two years, including acquisition of the building. The studio facility will be called Dogstar.

The 292,000-square-foot former Exxon factory is on nearly 19 acres near Exit 30 off I-95. It will include 12 soundstages, ranging from 2,500 square feet to 16,800. It will also offer 22,000 square feet of office space and 100,000 square feet of space for services that support movie, television and commercial productions leasing the stages.

Dogstar has "letters of intent to lease" space from 30 prospective tenants, Christopher

said. These tenants would serve film production companies by renting them audio, camera and lighting equipment, building sets, editing film post-production and serving food.

About 1,000 people could be employed at the site by the end of 2010, Christopher said, most of them in jobs with the tenants and film productions that come and go. He estimated that about 25 percent of the jobs would be "permanent" positions.

"That's realistic," he said.

Christopher said his current investor group includes fewer than six members and he would name only one, Doug McAward, a solo film producer in Waterbury who was chairman of the former Connecticut Film and Television Commission from the mid-1990s to 2003. All the partners have "skin in the game," Christopher said, and so far all the investment capital is private.

Dogstar has not sought any film tax credits from the state yet, Christopher said, but will eventually.

The partnership has sufficient capital to close on its real estate deal now, he said, but "in the entertainment industry, you're always looking for money."

McAward will serve as general manager of the Dogstar facility. In interviews, he and Christopher said they had no final commitments for film productions and could not lease space to full-time tenants until they closed on the property.

Christopher declined to discuss a settlement agreement he said he had reached with former partners in Hollywood East/Area 51, but said he is no longer affiliated with them or its plans for a film studio at the former Stratford Army Engine Plant.

J. Bruce Alessie, who oversees economic development projects for Stratford, said that Ed Natera, one of Christopher's former partners, is now in charge of Hollywood East/Area 51, but that he has not heard from him or his lawyer, Chuck Willinger of Bridgeport, in months.

Natera could not be reached Tuesday for comment. Willinger did not respond to a message left at his office.

George Norfleet, director of the Connecticut Office of Film, Television and Digital Media, said it's too soon to say whether the film production infrastructure projects planned for the state would satisfy demand.

"A lot of these projects have not come on line yet," he said.

Former State Film Chairman To Run Planned Stratford Movie Studio

By ERIC GERSHON

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A former chairman of Connecticut's defunct film and television commission will run the latest movie studio planned for development in the state.

Doug McAward will serve as general manager for Dogstar, a studio backed by an investor group led by Allen Christopher, a media entrepreneur and former film writer who urged the state to pass the generous film tax credits that he says make this project possible.

DMG Studio Holdings LLC has agreed to buy a 292,000-square-foot former Exxon Mobil plant in Stratford that will be redeveloped as a digital media and motion picture production complex, the group announced Tuesday.

The facility, which expects to host film productions as soon as early next year, Christopher said, will have 12 soundstages, 22,000 square feet of office space and 100,000 square feet of space for support services. The smallest stages will be about 2,500 square feet, the largest 16,800.

Christopher's investor group is the latest entrant to take advantage of the state's film tax credits, which offer salable credits of up to 30 percent on certain film-related expenses, including infrastructure.

"The tax credits for digital media and motion pictures offered by Connecticut played a major role in bringing this deal together," said Christopher, the managing member of DMG Studio Holdings LLC. "We believe our adaptive re-use in a high growth industry will create thousands of new jobs in Connecticut over the next few years."

Other developers are planning film studio projects in Windsor and South Windsor. Some existing film production firms have already established operations in Greenwich and Stamford. NBC Universal is now taping several of its television programs in the state, including "Springer," "Maury," "The Steve Wilkos Show" and "Deal or No Deal."