

Ex-Grumman hangars pulling more movie business to Long Island

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The entrance to Grumman Studios in Bethpage. Grumman and Gold Coast have hosted a handful of productions, and their stars are rising. (Dec. 18, 2013) (Credit: Barry Sloan)

Grumman Studios and Gold Coast Studios, two movie production facilities tucked among the sprawl of industrial warehouses in a corner of Bethpage, have put Long Island in Hollywood's lens.

Since opening four years ago, the two studios -- retrofitted from old hangars where Grumman Aerospace Corp. assembled warplanes and the Apollo Lunar Module, which carried astronauts to the moon -- have gained traction among television and film productions, augmenting an already lively local industry.

Grumman and Gold Coast have hosted a handful of productions, and their stars are rising. Recent prominent projects there include NBC's "The Sound of Music Live!," and the yet-to-be-released films "The Amazing Spider-Man 2" and the remake of "Annie" produced by Jay Z and Will Smith.

New York still dominates film activity in the state. But what the two Bethpage studios offer producers is enormous size -- an expansive blank canvas on which to build sets. Each has more than 100,000 square feet of space across multiple soundstages.

"There's nothing quite like [Grumman and Gold Coast] in New York City, because there's so much room," said Lyn Pinezich, a Brooklyn-based production manager who has worked at both facilities. They "have that huge, huge space that is configured brilliantly for movies -- they have no columns, [and have] high ceilings and giant parking lots." The largest stages at Grumman and Gold Coast are each nearly 38,000 square feet -- close to an acre -- and are bigger than any in New York City. The two studios, across the street from each other in Bethpage, are managed separately. Setauket-based real estate developer Parviz Farahzad owns Grumman. Gold Coast is overseen by Lyndsey Laverty and owned by her father Joe Lostritto's Plainview-based development company, Steel Equities.

Gaining jobs, revenue

The influx of film and TV projects to Long Island gives a measurable economic boost.

A July study commissioned by the Nassau County Industrial Development Agency on the impact of filming at Grumman, Gold Coast and the Sands Point Preserve in Port Washington in 2012 reported the production work created the equivalent of 278 new jobs, generated \$85 million in direct spending and earned the county \$800,000 in sales and hotel tax revenue. The IDA has granted both Grumman and Gold Coast property tax abatements.

The spending spills over to people like Andy Kollmeier, a manager at paint retailer Chroma Paint in Hicksville, who said business at the store is up 10 percent since 2009, when it began supplying paint for sets at Grumman and Gold Coast.

Film is a valuable trade for suburban areas, said Jason Squire, a professor at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. "From a local standpoint, this is basically attracting a nonpolluting, sexy, glamorous business to your community. They show up and they spend money."

The industry is active across Long Island. East Hampton Studios in Suffolk County, a smaller facility than the Bethpage studios, has been in business for the last 11 years and hosted its share of productions. And the Island has often been used for on-location shoots that make use of scenic assets such as local beaches, greenery and mansions.

But Grumman and Gold Coast, with their vast stages, are pulling more movie business to Long Island. Bethpage is within 30 miles of Columbus Circle, close enough that productions can employ set workers who are part of the New York City-based union without having to dole out overtime.

New York has hosted more and more film and TV work since enacting a 10 percent production tax credit in 2004, and expanding it to 30 percent in 2008. According to a study for the Motion Picture Association of America, the film industry in New York State grew by 25 percent from 2008 to 2011. In 2012, the state approved \$186 million in tax benefits to productions, according to a report from the Gannett News Services Albany bureau.

"Since the inception of the tax credit, we've been fairly busy," said John Ford, president of the Local 52 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees in New York City. Ford, a Westbury resident who has been in the business for more than 30 years, said in earlier times it was not uncommon to be out of work for up to four months out of the year.

The transient nature of the film and TV industry -- projects are canceled without warning, and local spending and jobs disappear once a production wraps up -- may limit the economic impact of taxpayer-subsidized production work.

Still, experts say New York benefits more than other states from increases in entertainment activity, because productions hire from an already established infrastructure of local creative freelancers and union workers.

Overflow from NYC

For the most part, Grumman and Gold Coast are attracting overflow business from New York City's studios. Producers say the city is still the first place to consider when it comes to soundstages, often because of convenience and the request of directors or actors.

But when size is required, they turn to Bethpage. "The Sound of Music Live!" and "The Amazing Spider-Man 2" came to Long Island for that reason.

"We were trying to stay in one big space," said Beth McCarthy-Miller, one of the directors of "The Sound of Music" production. "I think we lucked out" with Grumman.

Having all six sets -- among them the Swiss Alps and the foyer of the von Trapp family home -- for the live broadcast within one soundstage made the logistics of the production easier, McCarthy-Miller said. "Imagine if the cast members had to run from one building to another to get to a scene."

"The Amazing Spider-Man 2," which took up nine stages at Grumman and Gold Coast last year, was the "largest" movie ever made in New York, the state said. The sequel in the Marvel franchise spent a majority of its shooting days in the Bethpage studios, where a set for Peter Parker's house and replicas of a New York City subway station and Times Square were built.

"Having the Long Island studios was invaluable," said producer Bennett Walsh.

Grumman owner Farahzad, 64, who won the bid to purchase his property from Nassau County for \$19.5 million in 2006, wasn't familiar with the movie business. The former math professor intended to turn the space into research labs, offices and a tech incubator. But at the urging of state and local film officials, he agreed to give the silver screen a try.

"When I purchased this project, movies was not in the picture -- it just evolved," he said.

A start with 'Salt'

"Salt," the Angelina Jolie film about a rogue secret agent, put Grumman Studios on the map. The production moved into the facility to film in January 2009, when the buildings had no running water or gas. Fancy Porta-Potties and auxiliary heaters were brought in for the staff, Farahzad recalled.

After "Salt," he continued to make improvements to the space. Soon after, Sacha Baron Cohen's "The Dictator" came to build a set of the United Nations General Assembly and film a scene.

"There's something about this business of moviemaking -- it's very sexy, everybody gets excited about it," Farahzad said.

Meanwhile, Gold Coast opened in late 2010, after a tenant vacated the space. Lavery said she and her father, who owned the property, had entertained the idea of a studio business after seeing the heightened film activity in the city.

Lavery, 26, left her job in fashion marketing in the city to manage the space, jumping into promoting the studio, scheduling and calculating rates. Her future husband was being deployed to Afghanistan by the Marine Corps, and she wanted a new venture to keep herself busy. Within weeks of opening, Gold Coast brought on its first movie production, the thriller "Man on a Ledge."

"We just rolled with it really, and it's been a great experience," Lavery said.

Both Grumman and Gold Coast declined to give their revenues.

Right now, the biggest challenge the two face is still trying to persuade producers and location scouts to come see the space and take a chance, both Lavery and Farahzad said. With each new project they hope the spotlight will shine a little brighter on Bethpage.

"We are the lost child," Farahzad said. "We have to get found and be accepted."