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Grand unveiling for SouthField Studios' plan in Weymouth

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Hollywood film stars and the paparazzi might be a common sight in Columbian Square after a 12-stage motion picture studio is built at the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station.

California-based International Studio Group unveiled groundbreaking plans and colorful designs for the \$147 million complex at the State House on June 18.

“It is a good beginning and it is exciting,” said state Rep. Ronald Mariano (D-Quincy), who is attempting to get a 20 percent manufacturing tax credit for motion picture firms to open studios in Massachusetts. “For 17 years, I have been involved with the base, and it is good to see something positive come to fruition.”

After it is constructed, the complex will have facilities to produce TV commercials, movies, music videos, and satellite simulcasts.

“We’re thrilled to be able to make SouthField Studios-Boston a reality,” said Allan Kassirer, a principal partner with International Studio Group (ISG), in a statement to the News. “Through aggressive tax incentives for film production, Massachusetts has certainly positioned itself to become a leader in film and television production, and SouthField Studios-Boston provides the brick-and-mortar infrastructure that will help sustain this industry long-term in the Commonwealth.”

State Sen. Robert Hedlund (R-Weymouth), a co-sponsor of the proposed manufacturing tax credit bill for movie studios, said that ISG’s announcement was a great day for Weymouth.

“It should be a good job generator, and it should help jumpstart the redevelopment down at the base,” he said.

Groundbreaking for SouthField Studios is supposed to occur in late 2009, and construction is scheduled to begin in the spring of 2010.

“They will start building on the land that LNR already owns,” Mariano said.

LNR Property Corp. owns 549 acres at the base.

The Navy owns the remaining 835 acres and is negotiating a sales price for the parcels with LNR’s overseer, South Shore Tri-Town Development Corp.

Tri-Town is then supposed to sell the remaining acres it purchases to LNR under a Host Community Agreement that calls for the firm to construct a residential-commercial complex during the next 14 years.

“There are no concerns about the remaining property being tied up by the Navy,” Mariano said.

The Navy planned to turn the land over to Tri-Town in March, but the agency has no credit history and has been unable to get \$43 million worth of bonds to purchase the acres.

Tri-Town is negotiating a new price to buy the parcels, and the Navy agreed to stay a possible transfer of the acres until July 31 if an agreement is reached.

Mariano said that LNR could construct the entire studio complex on the land it owns on the northern tier of the base if there are difficulties with acquiring the remaining acres.

“The build-out of the 12 studios will take some time,” he said. “You could build nine studios without any question on the land that LNR owns.”

The soundstages will be built on 212,000 square feet of land.

ISG plans to construct a restaurant and a specialty store and have studio-lot streets with a colonial flavor that reflects historical sections of Boston.

Visitors will be able to enjoy a stroll on the streets and take advantage of an interactive tour in the heart of a planned village center in the complex.

“The construction will require about 1,500 temporary jobs right off the bat,” Mariano said. “ISG will be partnering with some of the colleges to develop some film crew teams. They will also be bringing in some expertise services for editing.”

He said that discussion about his proposed 20 percent manufacturing tax credit for movie studios was not mentioned during the meeting.

“I did bring the issue up,” Mariano said. “To build an industry, you have to go to the next step to encourage investment. We have filed a tax credit bill. People can now see that this industry for the area is real.”

The tax benefit would exempt motion picture firms like ISG from paying \$20 million in state taxes over a two-year period and would be a credit against future state taxes.

House lawmakers approved Mariano’s proposed bill last year, but the measure was not reviewed by the state Senate as the legislative clock wound down in August.

A House committee is reviewing the proposed tax credit.

“It would have to get out of committee and be taken up by the House before it would go to the Senate,” Hedlund said.

Mariano said that it is important for the tax credit to be approved because the movie studio offers much economic potential.

“The project has viability,” he said. “There are people out there who recognized that this is a good place to be located.”

The proximity of the location of the SouthField Studios to Boston was considered ideal by ISG.

“SouthField is the perfect location for this studio as it provides easy access to Boston, yet does not face the traffic congestion typically associated with the city,” Kassirer said. “South Weymouth and its surrounding towns stand to benefit greatly not just from the jobs it will create, but the growth of local businesses naturally associated with the motion picture industry.”

The leadership that will oversee SouthField Studios includes Robert Papazian and James Hirsch, who co-produced the TV shows CBS’s “Nash Bridges” and HBO’s “Rome.”

A review of the design plan for the SouthField Studios will be done by Tri-Town and officials from Weymouth, Abington, and Rockland before construction begins.