

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Hollywood production is booming, but are there enough local soundstages to support it?



*Construction is nearly completed on Warner Bros.' 36th soundstage in Burbank, scheduled to open in June. Photo courtesy Warner Bros.*

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The good news is that Hollywood's come back to Hollywood in a big way. Due to a combination of an [improved California state production tax credit program](#) and Netflix (not to mention other growing streaming services) making new shows on a seemingly weekly basis, cameras are rolling like never before in the L.A. region.

The bad news is, they're running out of places to shoot.

"We're very aware of it," Kevin James, director of the Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Film and Television, said of a soundstage crunch that's seeing local facilities designed for interior filming booked at near, long-term capacity. "It's a challenge for us, but it's a challenge we're very happy to have. It means that filmmaking's coming back, it's coming back in a large and significant way."



*Alton Butler, CEO of Soundstage facility Line 204 in Hollywood. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)*

Well, maybe not feature filmmaking so much as the big demand for space by longer-occupancy TV and streaming series productions may be forcing movie makers to look elsewhere. Some network producers and streaming outfits even tie up stage space when they're not shooting anything, to have it available when their show is renewed or Netflix greenlights another new series or 10.

"There's an overwhelming amount of production going on so the soundstages, it's been tight space," noted producer-director Grant Housley, who's planning to start a feature in the fall. "Everythings' booked. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, every single studio, tons of productions are going on. It's sort of a good problem to have because there's a lot of employment as well, but there's a limited amount of space these days."

Paul Audley, president of the region's main film office FilmL.A., confirmed the "crunch" has been growing. His office recently released reports that placed local soundstage occupancy rates at 92 and 96 percent in different periods of the last two years, up more than 20 points from the before-surge average.

"I think to the credit of the state tax incentive program we've seen so much television return, and then the expansion of the amount of content being produced here with companies like Netflix and Amazon and Hulu, we've pretty well filled up all the soundstages in the L.A. region," Audley continued. "Over 90 percent occupancy means that there's not a lot available for folks who might be coming in to visit or for features even, at this point. So it's created quite a crunch in the industry. They're now looking for where they can expand those resources."

Which isn't so easy due to other recent, Southern California economic phenomena such as skyrocketing real estate prices and uprising, more profitable mixed-use construction. Yet despite L.A.'s notorious overall space crunch, some steps are being taken to relieve its soundstage shortage.

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Crimson Studios opened five stages in Chatsworth last year. Warner Bros. is just completing its technically versatile 36th soundstage on its venerable Burbank lot – and although the studio declined to confirm it, Variety reported two years ago that Universal City plans to build 10 new stages. Netflix likewise didn’t want to discuss its extension plans, but it is believed more stages will come online at the Bronson Studios complex the streaming behemoth recently occupied in Hollywood.

And then there’s [Line 204’s planned, 10-stage Sun Valley Studio](#), which earlier this month got the legal go-ahead to break ground in September after years of court challenges from neighbors. The company’s chief executive Alton Butler, who’s operated stages in Hollywood for over a dozen years, pointed out that real estate was way too expensive around the buildings he already has for Line 204 to expand, and the Northeast San Fernando Valley was one of the few areas within the Thirty Mile Zone (a radius beginning in Hollywood, outside of which cast and crew must be paid extra to work) with enough affordable land for such an ambitious project.

“Anybody in the studio business who says ‘I’ll just build more,’ well no you won’t because there’s nowhere to build it,” Butler said. “It’s a quandary in a couple of aspects. You’d love to build more stages, but you can’t afford it in this area. You can afford it once you go out of the area, but you’ve got to get the kind of land you need to build a studio, and then you’re out of the Thirty Mile Zone. If you’re a mile out of that zone, actresses, producers, crew members get per diems, they get overnight stays, and it takes the budget drastically the other way. So you’ve got to stay within that Thirty Mile Zone, and it’s almost like looking for that needle in a haystack.”

Warner Bros. – which released the first synchronized sound film, “The Jazz Singer,” in 1927 and thus established the industry’s need for acoustically controllable stages – is about out of building space on its main lot in Burbank, too.

“It’s a question of finding capacity on these lots that we have,” Jeff Nagler, executive vice president, studio facilities for Warner Bros., acknowledged. “Our latest soundstage is on the main lot, and the main lot has, I think, pretty much reached capacity from a soundstage perspective. But we have our ranch studio, which is a half mile away, and we have developed plans previously to possibly put up three or four new soundstages at the ranch. So if we feel the need, we may decide to build two stages at a time or something like that. It’s all going to be based on what we view as the need for Warner Bros. and for other entities.”

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Nagler noted that the crunch has driven other studios and outside producers to book time on Warners stages. He expects the new one, like the other 35, will be fully occupied when it opens in June – which is just about when production for the next network TV season gets underway.

“I’m confident that those who want a home in Los Angeles will find one, and it’s because of companies like ours that continue to invest here,” Nagler said. “There is some space crunch going on. But I’m generally finding people do find a home. It might not be their first choice, it might not be their optimal configuration every time, but production people are very resourceful and they find a way to get their product made.”

“We, and the city and county, have been helping to find locations where they can convert warehouses or other properties so that they can do filming,” FilmL.A.’s Audley noted. “It’s much easier for television to do that because they don’t need quite the same height and space that features do. So we’ve seen some of that, we’ve seen some of the big box stores that have been closed up and are becoming permanent stages for some television shows.

“So, we’re improvising. But I think everybody would like to see more consolidated facilities on one piece of property.”

Line 204’s Butler confirmed the last part of Audley’s statement, and took it further.

“The big thing over the last two years has been, well, I’ll just buy a warehouse Downtown, put some mounts in it and put some Insul-Quilt up, and buddy we’ve got us a soundstage,” Butler pointed out with some mockery. “Not really; you’ve got a warehouse that’s got some Insul-Quilt on it. A lot of people don’t want that.”

The city, meanwhile, is doing what it can to meet the soundstage challenge it’s so happy to have.

“We know that Apple is also scouting spaces, I would expect that Amazon is, secondary to the headquarters issue, just studios,” James from the Mayor’s Film and TV Office said. “These are things that our office in conjunction with the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, we work together with them on. So we’re dealing with a number of things related to that.

“We’re keeping our eye on [it] and working together with the various council offices and other stakeholders when studios are looking to acquire space that can be converted to soundstage space or changed into soundstage space. And there are a number of sites in various parts of the city that are candidates.”

Link to article: <https://www.ocregister.com/2018/04/28/hollywood-production-is-booming-but-are-there-enough-local-soundstages-to-support-it/>