

## President Thompson's letter to City Manager Bartolotta

Mr. Bartolotta

I am writing you to present an important idea and proposal for economic development in our community. This opportunity will do two things: (1) benefit the academic program and the continued development of the Ringling College of Art and Design as one of the very top art and design colleges worldwide; and (2) help transform the City of Sarasota, Sarasota County, and the entire Tampa Bay region into a place where film making can take place and flourish.

Let me explain. As you know, about three years ago, Ringling College of Art and Design launched a new academic major leading to a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in the area of Digital Film making. Thus, the College now has a "film" school without the complexities of processing celluloid. We are focusing on digital film making which definitely is the future in the industry. We currently have dozens of students enrolled in the program and anticipate continued annual enrollment growth as demand for the program steadily increases.

We at Ringling College of Art and Design have been assessing our needs for the Digital Film making program and one very real need is a professional sound stage where students can shoot their projects, and where visiting and mentoring producers, directors and film making professionals can give students real world hands-on experience. A sound stage is an open interior space that is at least 10,000-12,000 square feet in size. The sound stage is somewhat like a television studio with sets, cameras, equipment, etc. and allows the director/producer of a TV show, commercial or infomercial to control whatever environment is necessary for their film making needs. Many films and almost all TV shows and commercials are shot to some extent in sound stages because of the following: the interior can be adapted to suit the individual project, sets can be constructed and utilized, and environmental issues of shooting on-site outside can be eliminated.

Ringling College has a need for a sound stage, what is also abundantly clear is that the City of Sarasota and the County of Sarasota need a sound stage in order to attract professional productions to our area, which will create jobs and enhance this community's economic development. The need became especially evident when the Economic Development Corporation of Sarasota County - through its Film Commission - hosted a group of eight movie producers last fall for an on-site tour of Sarasota. The purpose of this visit was to make industry professionals aware of our community offerings and to encourage them to bring their projects to the Sarasota area. The producers all fell in love with our region and thought it would be an excellent place to shoot a film. But (and this is a big but) the producers unanimously agreed that Sarasota had to provide a sound stage in order for filmmakers to seriously consider working on a project of size in Sarasota. Without a sound stage, they explained, all

filming would need to be outdoors, on location, and would be subject to our climate, extreme weather conditions and other variables. These producers were outspoken in encouraging our community to build a sound stage so that they and their colleagues could use Sarasota for motion picture production.

With that background, let me give you my proposal. On behalf of Ringling College and our community, I propose that the City of Sarasota consider transforming the Municipal Auditorium on North Tamiami Trail into a sound stage.

Under this proposal, the City would lease the Auditorium to Ringling College of Art and Design at a nominal annual rate (much like the Sarasota County School Board is doing with the historic Sarasota High School) and the College would be responsible for re-purposing the Auditorium into a sound stage to be used by the College and the community. The College would assume responsibility for maintenance of tile structure and would use it for its academic program. That would be the main priority for use. Yet, because the College would not be using the facility full-time, there would definitely be available excess capacity for use of tile sound stage by private productions, attracting revenue and jobs to Sarasota, as such facilities do in other competing regions. The College would manage the facility for use by such outside entities.

This is an enormous potential win-win for the College and the community. As a user for educational purposes and as a manager of the sound stage facility, the College would encourage the utilization of the sound-stage by others, including movie productions, TV productions, commercial productions, infomercials and other appropriate projects. As an educational institution we would encourage those using the facility to use Ringling College or other students as interns to work with them in making their productions, as well as hiring local professionals in film, TV, and other production.

The Municipal Auditorium is a perfect place for this to happen. The building is ideally suited for use as a sound stage. It is open spanned and has about 10,000-12,000 square feet of space - the minimum needed for an effective sound stage. Indeed, the building almost looks like an MGM sound stage. Although modifications will be needed to the interior of the building, there would not be any need to modify the historic look of the facade, especially its frontage. The College would be responsible for obtaining the funding to convert the building internally into a sound stage.

From Ringling College's perspective, the Auditorium is ideally situated. It is within walking distance to campus and has a wonderful presence along the North Trail. Indeed, it compliments what Ringling College has been doing with its campus at the intersection of the North Trail and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive and the historic Sarasota High School located on the South Trail. Because the auditorium is on the North Trail, converting it into a sound stage for film would make a huge statement demonstrating the importance of film, and indeed all of the arts in this community as economic drivers. It would also send a positive message that underscores the City's commitment to the redevelopment of the North Trail as part of the cultural corridor. The adaptive reuse of the Municipal Auditorium as a sound stage obviously helps solve

one of Ringling College's needs for its educational program as it moves to becoming not just one of the very top art and design colleges in the world but THE preeminent art and design college. This effort would demonstrate a great partnership between the City of Sarasota and Ringling College to enhance economic vitality for this community. Most importantly, converting the Municipal Auditorium into a sound stage would serve as a major economic development driver for the City of Sarasota, the County, and the region. Why? It would create and draw jobs to this community - quality jobs with above average wages. During a major production of a TV show or motion picture there are 50 to 100 full-time people working on the production with average annual wages of approximately 560,000 or greater. In addition to the people on the set, there are a number of people employed off the set, including set designers, graphic designers, entertainment lawyers, accountants, etc.

A sound stage would also attract and retain highly skilled workers and provide opportunities for recent graduates from film programs in the area helping to prevent the brain drain we tend to experience in this community. The benefits economically for this City could be immense. In addition such a bold action would further put Sarasota on the map as THE cultural and arts community of Florida, and one which is doing something dynamic and proactive in this poor economy to make exciting opportunities happen to diversify the economy.

The timing for this potential move could not be better. Although I originally had reservations about Sarasota becoming a filming community, I no longer have those reservations, primarily because of the response we have received from the College's establishment of a Digital Film making Studio Lab. Initiated in January of this year, this novel concept brings to the College world-renowned people in the motion picture industry to teach and work directly with the students of Ringling College. The inaugural person attending was the famous Werner Herzog, director of more than 60 major films as well as being a famous author and producer. The next luminary to participate in the program was producer Paul Schiff, who has produced such movies as

"My Cousin Vinny." Schiff taught and mentored our students and then showed them and an invited audience a private, pre-release screening of his new film "Solitary Man," to much acclaim. This film stars Michael Douglas, Susan Sarandon, and Danny DeVito, and is slated for release in May 2010. In the upcoming weeks, Ringling College will host an Oscar-nominated director/screenwriter and an up-and-coming stellar actor, as the March portion of Digital Film making Studio Lab. While here, they too will interact with and teach our students the business of film making.

The Digital Film making Studio Lab is being implemented by Ringling in association with Future Films, a company with local ties that has extensive connections in both the motion picture and television industries, to bring these notable individuals to campus. The ultimate goal of the Digital Film making Studio is to forge both educational and professional relationships among writers, directors and producers, by bringing them to Sarasota to produce projects as well as to develop new material for films. Indeed, this is a fabulous way for these film industry leaders to be part of the Sarasota community, to work with eager film making students, and to generate and develop innovative ideas for

production of new films. By combining the world renowned education with funds for script development and a high-end sound stage, the city of Sarasota will have a mixture of economic incentives that simply will not be replicable by anyone else.

In combination, Sarasota will stand out nationally and rapidly be able to attract top-tier projects. Those projects will not only infuse substantial revenue into a community, drive economic growth and provide press, publicity and drive tourism, they will also attract high skill, high wage people to relocate to our area as well, bringing families, buying homes, and much more.

I trust you will seriously consider this proposal and I look forward to speaking with you further on how we, together, can move forward to propose this to the City Commissioners and have them authorize you and your staff to work on this idea. Please don't hesitate to contact me at any time if you have any questions or would like additional information. I can be reached via phone at 941.359.7601 or via email me at [president@ringling.edu](mailto:president@ringling.edu)

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Very Truly Yours,

Larry R. Thompson  
President

2700 N. Tamiami Trail Sarasota. FL 34234'5895 T 941 359 7601 F 941 359 6108  
[president@ringling.edu](mailto:president@ringling.edu) [www.ringling.edu](http://www.ringling.edu)