

Spotlight on Toronto: 2021 Review and Updates

November 2021

Spotlight on Toronto: A Strategic Action Plan for the Film, Television and Digital Media Industry was conceived and created by the Toronto Film, Television and Digital Media Board and adopted at City Council in July 2017. The screen industry had been experiencing a steady growth period for six consecutive years and needed an actionable plan that would best equip the City of Toronto and its stakeholders to competitively foster this industrial and creative expansion for the years to come and anchor it as an undisputedly film-friendly and innovative city.

Fast-forward to 2021 and the screen industry contributes over \$2B each year for the local economy, employs over 35,000 Torontonians and is set for remarkable growth for the next five years. Physical production infrastructure is set to expand by 63% to capitalize on global production volumes in live action, post-production, VFX and Animation and Toronto's prime placement in the international market. Toronto is widely recognized as a preeminent centre of excellence for its creative talent, expansive infrastructure (soundstages, post-production studios), the variety of its locations, its gold-standard level of customer service, the booming sectors adjacent to entertainment like tech, tourism, sports and culture, for the advantageous financial incentives in the province and for the overall cosmopolitan and inclusive nature of the city.

This document highlights the key achievements by the Film Board and the Film Office staff that stemmed from *Spotlight's* five strategic pillars and acts as a basis to assess and discuss the remainder of the Board term's priorities and prepare for an increasingly competitive future. **This is a living document created for review and to open up discussion and is not a final update or report.**

1. Active Advocacy

Possible Future Strategic Priorities

- Act as government partner in extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID19 pandemic to ensure the industry can continue working safely
- Engage all levels of government to respond to new and emerging issues impacting the screen industry and continue encouraging competitive and stable tax credits

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Advocacy for stability in tax incentives and promotion of incentives as jurisdictional advantage
- Ensure industry is recognized for its active and successful response to the pandemic and messaging to public and elected officials reflecting it
- Informational film-activity touchpoints between Film Office and Councillors: sharing of film shoot statistics, production footprint, employment levels, issues management and local donations (xoTO Givebacks)
- Fostering collaboration with industry and with City divisions on inserting film-friendly lens to City Planning frameworks, including Transportation, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Corporate Real Estate Management, the Environment and Energy Office and Toronto Public Health.
- Data gathering on and sharing of economic impact of the industry, both internally and externally
- Encourage competitive and stable tax credits

Completed Strategic Projects:

- Supported the continuance of the TFTDM Board in new term of Council
- Participation in drafting and advocating for implementation of strict COVID-19 related health and safety protocols (Section 21 Film and Television Health and Safety Advisory Committee of the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development)

2. Strong Fundamentals in Physical Infrastructure and Workforce Development

2.1 Physical Infrastructure:

The City of Toronto is now home to over 2.5M sq ft of production space. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the space footprint grew by over 500k sq ft across 13 stages, and the GTHA at large is expecting a 63% increase from today's capacity by 2025.

Possible Future Strategic Priorities

- Actively investigate City-owned properties and land for additional production/post-production use
- Green Infrastructure: Creation of two power drops per year after initial commitment of two in Fall 2021 to expand access to grid power at key base camp and filming locations

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Assistance to studio developers on sites search (land and buildings for permanent or temporary use) and promotion of IMIT / Gold Star Program
- Assistance to studio developers to fast-track building permit applications
- Build messaging to expand major screen industry players to expand and/or establish themselves in the GTA. Recent additions and expansions include Pixomondo, Ubisoft, Netflix, CBS, Amazon, Stoopid Buddy Studios, Folks VFX
- Work with Transportation Services to allow and permit road closures for film productions as well as film-related public and industry events
- Ongoing renewal of xoTO Schools to simplify access for location shoots at TDSB facilities and permitted the school board to rent all its parking lots to film productions regardless of location use
- Green Infrastructure: Power Drops Pilot under way to install two power drops at prime base-camp locations in two city parks by end of 2022 to reduce the use of diesel generators

Completed Strategic Projects:

- Initiated and received critical reports on studio space loss, replacement and expansion options:
 - Report on Film and Screen Industry Studios in the Port Lands and South of Eastern Employment District ([Report](#) – July 2017)
 - Report on Options for Film Studio Infrastructure ([Report](#) – February 2018)
 - Soundstage Market Sounding Assessment ([Report](#) – August 2019)
- Supported the acquisition of Showline Studios (decision link) by City of Toronto and subsequent RFP by CreateTO for new studio operator to maximize the future of the site as a production space. Studio City was awarded the site and new jumbo stage now built and occupied. ([Announcement](#))

- Supported the RFP by CreateTO for a film studio developer/operator for the Basin Media Hub ([Site brochure](#)) to add up to 500k sq ft of purpose-built production/post-production space.
- Council adoption of film policy directions as part of TOCore (inclusion of [Film Precinct](#) p.62), Port Lands Planning Framework and its PIC Core (Production, Interactive and Creativity Core [Urban Design Guidelines](#)) and East Harbour.
- Secured film industry interest protection as part of King Street pilot model, Yonge Street rejuvenation and bike lanes installation across busy film streets including University Avenue, Adelaide Avenue and Shuter Street

2.2 Workforce Development:

Growing and diversifying the workforce pool in Toronto has been a prime aspect of addressing the global market demand and opportunities for job creation in Toronto. xoTO Screen Industry Pathways are a set of activities conceived to educate and train new workers into the field. 35,000 Torontonians are employed in the screen sector and with the expected infrastructure expansions announced for the next five years, the sector will need over 10,000 additional workers.

Possible Future Strategic Priorities:

- Investigate curriculum gaps at training institutions in the GTHA
- Scale up production/company placements for participants of local, supported community programs
- Initiate the creation of GTA screen industry job fair/marketplace (annually)
- Continue 2021+ deep focus on diversity and inclusion in workforce development activities

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Identify training gaps and co-design and support of ground-breaking training programs to bring on diverse Torontonians in key in-demand roles with major scaling in 2022 to include the expansion and launch of programs for BIPOC youth for in-demand roles in Production Assisting, Production Accounting, Trades (construction, grip, electric), VFX, Art Direction, Editing and Virtual Production (100+ participants). All programs are designed and implemented with social services and community media groups, unions and guilds
- Connecting to film companies and productions seeking to hire Black, Indigenous and People of Color and tap into the strong network of training programs across the city
- Partner with Toronto Employment & Social Services (TESS) and other levels of government funding to scale up the above programs for major launch and announcement in summer 2022
- Launch of xoTO Schools program to educate high-school students at the Toronto District School Board about careers in film: Co-Op Placements on sets for 15 students 4 experiential learning events at town hall events, Career Talks online during stay-at-home orders with over 1,000 students between January and May 2021. ([Announcement](#))
 - 2018-2021: 4514 co-op hours and 44 co-op credits earned and 1000 students in virtual learning sessions (due to pandemic and set to continue monthly even when in-person co-ops can resume)
 - An additional 118 students enrolled in High Skills Major (SHSM) did experiential learning sessions to obtain certificate required for graduation
 - Virtual sessions in 2021 included DGC-ON talks, Animation workshop by Switch Animation, The Expanse production presentation, VIACOMCBS characters sales talk, Paramount Pictures presentation and more

- Upcoming launch of the Online Film Career Toolkit in Fall 2022 to assist aspiring film workers to understand the various jobs in pre-production, production and post-production, VFX and Animation, the many training pathways, and the industry hubs that can assist individuals and connect them to the greater ecosystem.
- Encourage and secure Community Based Agreements (CBAs) for infrastructure development

Completed Strategic Projects:

- Initiated and received the Toronto Screen Industry Workforce Study ([Report Link](#) – March 2021) to benchmark the growth requirements and opportunities for the screen industry workforce in order to respond to the jurisdiction's growing market demand

3. Exceptional Customer Service Enhancements

Toronto Film Office is widely recognized as the gold-standard in customer service. Ensuring seamless processes are in place to produce and post-produce in Toronto as well as fostering a sense of pride in Torontonians have been a core principles of the work stemming from *Spotlight*.

Possible Future Strategic Priorities:

- Scale up public awareness campaigns and community engagement as industry grows and footprint expands in neighborhoods (residents and businesses)
- Increase sustainability info-sharing with productions in Toronto
- Consider a supplier diversity showcase for vendors to be introduced to wide industry
- Greening: Investigate City of Toronto solid waste management gaps relating to screen industry needs

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Ensure the Film Permitting Office is appropriately staffed to offer the highest level of customer service excellence proportionate to sector expansion aligned with and based on industry feedback and requirements
- Launch of xoTO Givebacks in 2018 to encourage productions to give back to neighborhoods they shoot in and celebrate these actions with the public. Examples include a free *Shazam!* screening, a Unions & Guilds Spring Cleanup of city parks, monthly donations by productions to local not-for-profits and a [special edition](#) of xoTO Givebacks to assist in the early months of the pandemic
- xoTO Schools: TDSB sites identified and made available for streamlined permitting, standard rate card. TDSB parking lots are now permitted by the City of Toronto to be rented out for production vehicles whether the school is used a location, to reduce parking on local streets

Completed and Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Film Permit turnaround time is a guaranteed 48 hours and film permit coordinators liaise with all relevant City divisions. This is the shortest turnaround time in North America
- The film permitting system is now fully online and going through its second revamp to address any enhancements for a streamlined service (FilmPal 2.0)

4. Globally-Recognized, Innovative Digital Media Sector

The growth of the post-production, VFX and Animation sector has been tremendous in the past years and the messaging around Toronto as a centre of excellence increasingly taps into the reality and opportunities offered by this fast-growing and nimble portion of the industry.

Possible Future Strategic Priorities:

- Investigate digital bandwidth infrastructure and support research, innovation and access to top-end data-sharing products and services
- Define sub-sectors within Digital Media umbrella as it pertains to screen industries and prioritize strategic actions needed

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

- Increase focus on Virtual Production, Post-Production, VFX and Animation capacity and growth in business attraction messaging
- Ongoing conversations with internet providers, cloud services and data-sharing key players on creating industry-specific products and incentives
- Film & Entertainment Industries opened an Interactive Digital Media Office, to work closely with the Film Office, and other sectors, on cross-sectoral promotion and business attraction and expansion in the gaming sector, AR, VR, XR and when complementary, the tech sector

Completed Strategic Projects:

- Participation in CASO as full member and support of CASO studies like [Report: Business Intelligence: Ontario's Computer Animation and Visual Effects Companies, 2018](#)
- Yearly support and attendance at the TAAFI Job Fair

5. Dynamic Branding and Strong International and Business Partnerships

xoTO is attached to all film-related news, programs and marketing assets as a recognizable "brand" to celebrate and promote the Toronto screen industry.

Possible Future Strategic Priorities:

- Lean into VFX/Animation/Virtual Production on promotion messaging
- Market Toronto talent and expertise for service productions to familiarize themselves with and tap into, and to Torontonians to recognize
- Increase year-round branding/events of industry as a whole (xoTO) to locals and international stakeholders. Provide city-wide marketing tools to industry stakeholders

Ongoing Strategic Projects:

Industry Marketing and Business Attraction:

- Yearly Mayor's Missions to Los Angeles with large delegation to thank key partners and promote the Toronto ecosystem
- Co-fund Toronto/Ontario LA Office with Province to attract business year-round in Los Angeles.
- Monthly-to-Quarterly xoTO Newsletter to international stakeholders to update on industry developments

- xoTO House at TIFF in September to welcome local and international industry welcoming over 400 guests
- Partnerships with and presence at numerous local film events, including award shows, Festivals and training institutions. xoTO visual presence (ads) for industry and public
- Participation of the Film Office in the province-wide Ontario Green Screen committee
- Bi-annual TTC bus shelters, billboards and social media "Toronto Loves Film" campaigns to celebrate projects made in Toronto (emphasis on local talent, recognisability of projects and Givebacks)
- Year-round press/public announcements orchestrated around studio expansions, industry launches, set visits and workforce development initiatives

Submitted by:

TFTDM Board Co-Chairs: Councillor Paula Fletcher and Neishaw Ali

Economic Development & Culture staff: Marguerite Pigott and Magali Simard