



Film Fest and Theater Sponsorship Program Guidelines

**Montana Department of Commerce
Film Office**

Montana Department of Commerce

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About the Film Office

The Montana Department of Commerce Film Office was established in 1974 as a central information source for on-location filmmakers and is committed to serving the production industry and the citizens of Montana. The primary role of the Film Office is to promote the State of Montana as a media production location, including for film, television and print industries. Its goals are to:

- Invite productions into Montana for the overall economic benefit of the state.
- Help producers find locations that fit their scripts and act as their liaison through every phase of production.
- Nurture and support the development of Montana's resident crew base and resident filmmakers.

The Film Office is a program within Commerce and is funded by an allocation of the Lodging Facility Use Tax, commonly known as the bed tax. In 2023, [SB 540](#) revised the laws related to state-funded tourism promotion to require a specific allocation of lodging facility use tax for Montana-based film grants. Legislation enacted in 2025, [SB 409](#) further defined the use of the funds. The sponsorship program is funded from a portion of that allocation.

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Film Fest and Theater Sponsorship Program Guidelines

Film Fest and Theater Sponsorship Program Summary

The purpose of the sponsorship program is to assist Montana communities and advance Montana's economic and cultural objectives by promoting rural tourism and dispersal of visitors; developing a skilled, sustainable workforce; supporting a professional, year-round film industry; enhancing community partnerships and business development and demonstrating stewardship of public funds through efficient, targeted investments.

Sponsorships support projects and defined activities such as film festivals, film tours, screening series and film industry related conferences. Additionally, rural theaters may receive sponsorship for one-time projects. Applicants seeking funding under this program should be prepared and present a project and plan to proceed and complete within a time frame of 12 consecutive months, typically Jan. 1 to Dec. 31 each year. Funds are limited; the program is offered on a competitive annual basis. The application cycle opens 12:01 a.m. on Sept. 1 and closes at 11:59 p.m. on Sept. 30 each year. Awards are announced the following December.

The Film Office administers the sponsorship program in accordance with these guidelines.

Definitions

Economic Impact: The quantifiable effect a particular activity or event has on the economy of a specific area, county or region.

Film Industry: The collective businesses and creative entities involved in filmmaking, distribution and exhibition.

Film Festival: A curated event that screens visual media, typically a diverse selection of films for audiences over a set period in a specific community. They may include cinema in all its forms and often offer the only opportunity to see films that lack traditional theater distribution.

Film Screening Series: A film screening series at a theater is a curated, recurring event where a specific lineup of movies is shown over a set period, such as weekly or monthly. These programs focus on thematic, director, genre retrospectives, showcase new independent films and often feature question and answer sessions with filmmakers.

Film Tour: A series of film screenings or a festival that travels to different communities across Montana within a defined time frame.

Independent Theater: A movie theater independently owned and operated; not owned or part of a national, corporate chain. May be for-profit or nonprofit.

Media Production/Media Manufacturing: Specialized business of creation, development and distribution of media content films, television and broadcast, commercial advertising, digital content, music, podcasts, animation and VFX, web and video games.

Out-of-Area Visitors: Travelers coming from more than 50 miles away.

Project: The unique, organized activity or set of activities with a defined goal or outcome for which the applicant is requesting sponsorship, funding and support. The project is typically temporary or confined to a specific timeline and may not extend beyond one calendar year.

Recipient: The applicant selected who accepts and receives a sponsorship award from Commerce.

Rural: Rural is defined as “not urban.” See definition of “urban” below.

Rural Theater: A movie theater located in a rural (not urban) community in Montana.

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Shoulder Season: Periods of time between the end of one of Montana's typical tourism seasons and the beginning of its next typical tourism season. Shoulder seasons may vary based on geographic location within Montana, but typically run September through November and March through May.

Sustainability: Ensuring the long-term viability of a project beyond the sponsorship period.

Theater: A physical space or building equipped with audience seating and large projection screen for showing movies. Also known as the cinema, picture house or movie theater.

Tourism: Refers to the activity of people traveling to and staying in places at least 50 miles from their usual environment for leisure, business or other purposes.

Urban: Urban places are either: (1) a census urban area with a population at or exceeding 30,000 people according to the most recent United States Census or (2) an incorporated city/town within 10 miles of one of those large urban areas. Areas in Montana that meet this definition include Belgrade, Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Columbia Falls, East Helena, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, Laurel, Missoula, Walkerville and Whitefish.

Application Eligibility

Eligible Applicants

Eligible applicants include entities that primarily associate with the film industry or media manufacturing and can demonstrate a known and direct relationship and seek funding for a specific project utilizing film to educate, inform, inspire and entertain attendees or participants.

Only the following entities are eligible to apply for sponsorship:

- Business Individual – sole proprietor or single-member limited liability corporation.
- Business entity – LLC, partnership, S Corp., C Corp., for-profit or non-profit.
- Non-governmental entity.
- Independent Theater – for-profit, nonprofit, rural or urban.

Applicant may submit only one application per cycle; only one project per cycle will be eligible.

Applicants must have a current, active business registration and be in good standing with the Montana Secretary of State's Office and submit proof in the form of a certificate at the time of application.

Applicants must be registered with the IRS and have received a federal tax identification number and submit proof in the form of a current and complete IRS Form W-9 Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification at the time of application.

Applicants may have been awarded a sponsorship in the prior year and still be eligible to apply and receive awards in consecutive years. A previous sponsorship award does not guarantee or generally preclude a subsequent award. An applicant who has received sponsorship in five consecutive years or more may be considered for additional awards only if available funds remain after all other eligible requests in the current application cycle have been approved.

Applicant may not be the recipient of another Commerce Destination MT Division tourism grant in the same calendar year.

Sponsorship Categories

There are four unique sponsorship categories. Applicants may select only one category per application and may submit only one application per cycle:

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Film Festival: One event, one or more consecutive days, one per year. Minimum award \$1,000; maximum award of up to \$10,000.

Film Series: Series of film screenings within the same calendar year. Minimum award \$1,000; maximum award of up to \$10,000.

Film Tours: More than one screening event as part of a physical tour to more than one Montana community within same calendar year. Minimum award \$1,000; maximum award of up to \$10,000.

Rural or Independent Theater: One-time support of a project or defined activities that add value or contribute to the sustainability of the specific rural or independently owned theater. Does not have to be both rural and independently owned. An independently owned theater in an urban community is eligible. Minimum award of \$1,000; maximum award of up to \$5,000.

Funding Availability

Award amounts will depend upon various factors, including the number of applications received in a grant cycle, the discretion of the review committee and approval from Commerce. Annual sponsorship funds are subject to funding availability. Commerce reserves the right to award partial or full sponsorships of up to \$10,000 or reject applications. The total annual budget for the Film Fest and Theater Program varies.

Eligible Projects

Applications will be considered for projects that generally align with Commerce's mission and goals and reflect positively on Commerce and the State of Montana.

The applicant's project and defined activities must occur and be physically located within Montana.

The project and defined activities must occur during and be completed within the 12 consecutive months between Jan. 1-Dec. 31.

Eligible Use of Funds

Sponsorship recipients may generally use funds to:

- Purchase supplies, materials, advertising services and rentals directly related to the project.
- Pay compensation for work performed in accordance with and as outlined in the project description and budget submitted with the application.

Sponsorship funds can only be used for costs incurred on or after the award date and may only be used for approved projects as described in the submitted application.

Ineligible Projects

Projects and activities that are not eligible to be supported with sponsorship funds include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Projects including online activities that make up 50% or more of the project, regardless of the hosting URL.
- Activities and projects that are primarily to support an organization's ongoing and recurring operational costs such as rent, staffing, insurance coverage, maintenance, etc.
- Any event prohibited by Montana or federal law.
- Any private or members-only activity.
- Projects located or conducted outside of Montana.
- Projects extending beyond a 12-month period.

Ineligible Use of Funds

Expenses that generally are not eligible to be supported with sponsorship funds include:

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- Any ongoing or monthly general operating expenses.
- Costs related to refinancing, servicing or interest toward any existing debt.
- Costs incurred prior to the date identified in the contract.
- Ongoing maintenance.
- Political or religious activities.
- Purchase of real property.
- Purchase of vehicles.
- Uses prohibited by Montana or federal law.
- Uses prohibited by the contract signed by the recipient and Commerce.
- Uses prohibited by these guidelines or other Commerce directives.

Application Submission

The Film Office accepts online sponsorship applications. Applicants may apply through the link available on the Film Fest and Theater Sponsorship Program page of montanafilm.com. Links are only available and accessible during the sponsorship application submission cycle.

The application submission process is as follows:

1. Verify eligibility by reading through the guidelines carefully and becoming familiar with the application requirements.
2. Prepare, gather and organize required information and electronic documents to submit with the application: IRS Form W-9 and the current registration certificate from the Montana Secretary of State's Office that indicates active and in good standing.
3. Create a State of Montana Okta account. Contact the State's IT Help Desk at 406-444-2000 with any issues or for assistance. Using an official email address associated with the applicant organization is recommended, not an individual's email that may be used for other purposes or organizations.

4. Complete the specific online application located on the Montana Grants and Loans Portal at: montana.servicenowservices.com/mtgl and submit by 11:59 p.m. MST on the application close date.

For help or for more information on the sponsorship program, call the Film Office at 406-841-2883 or email montanafilm@mtgov.

Application Review Process and Criteria

The review committee meets annually to review and evaluate eligible applications in the respective cycle. The review committee makes recommendations to the administrator of Commerce's Destination MT Division, who makes the final funding decision.

Receipt of Application

An application must be completed, submitted and received online by 11:59 p.m. MST on the application close date. Applications in draft state after the close date will be automatically withdrawn and will not be considered.

Application Evaluation

Eligible applications will be scored based on the following criteria:

- Completeness of all required information on the application.
- Proof of registration status with the Montana Secretary of State's Office.
- Proof of tax identification number with the IRS as supplied on Form W-9.
- Project description and details that identify who, what, when, where, why and how.
- A specific amount is requested and does not exceed the category maximum award amount available.

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- Location of project within the geographic area of Montana.
- Total project cost (budget).
- List of all sources of income, funding or revenue.
- List of all uses or expenses.
- Projected attendance or participation.
- The use of metrics to determine outcomes, successes or completeness of the project.
- A target audience is identified.
- Applicant has demonstrated the capacity and agrees to administer the distribution of a specific Commerce post-participation survey to attendees or participants within the specified time frame and at no cost to Commerce.

Special Consideration and Preference

An application will receive special consideration for any or all the following:

- Demonstrates a direct connection or contribution to meeting the goals and objectives of Commerce's Destination MT Division.
- Project is supported by funding from other sources, such as community, sponsors, film industry, private investment or donations, charitable contributions, etc.
- Applicant offers sponsorship benefits to Commerce.
- Project is located primarily in a rural community.
- Project occurs primarily during Montana's shoulder season.

Award Process and Contract Administration

This program is a competitive offering; not all eligible applications will be funded. Some applications may receive a partial sponsorship award. Sponsorship awards are limited to one per year per recipient.

1. After the successful completion of the review process, Film Office staff will notify all applicants of their award status.

2. Selected applicants must officially accept the sponsorship award as offered and acknowledge their intent to enter a required contract with Commerce.
3. Commerce will issue an official announcement of sponsorship recipients. Recipients will hold their announcements until after Commerce has made its official announcement.
4. Recipients must complete all startup requirements prior to contracting with Commerce. Startup requirements include proof of an active registration with the Montana Secretary of State's Office, current IRS Form W-9 on file and proof of commercial general liability insurance coverage, all in the name of the recipient. Additionally, the recipient must authorize Commerce to deposit payment of funds using electronic funds transfer to an official bank account. Failure to complete startup requirements within five business days of award notification may result in forfeiture of the award.
5. Recipients will be assigned a contract liaison. The liaison will facilitate the disbursement of funds, contract compliance, assisting with Commerce branding and auditing of required deliverables and reporting.
6. The sponsorship contract must be signed by an authorized representative of the recipient and be fully executed prior to disbursement of any funds. Per the contract, funds will be disbursed within 30 days of contract execution.
7. Recipients must adhere to current Commerce branding guidelines and use appropriate logo placement on all printed and digital promotional materials, signage, social media, and if applicable, the recipient's website. Recipients must allow for and receive Commerce approval of use of branding on all project promotion utilizing Commerce branding; typically, a minimum of eight weeks is needed. The recipient

must also recognize Commerce in any announcements controlled by the recipient. Commerce branding resources are located online at commerce.mt.gov.

8. Upon completion of the project, the recipient must submit deliverables and required reporting as outlined in the contracted scope of work, all in the format and time frame prescribed by Commerce.

Program Contacts

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