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By: Nancy Barnes 05/08/2008

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NEW MILFORD-As two teenagers strode across the Railroad Street parking lot in the enveloping mist last Friday night, one remarked to the other, "If I see Keanu Reeves, I will just die."

The reference was to one of the famous actors starring with a host of others-Robin Wright Penn and Winona Ryder among them-in the comedy/drama written and directed by Rebecca Miller, "The Private Lives of Pippa Lee," that began filming in New Milford late last week and wrapped up early this week.

Yet, for all the celebrity sightings and crowds that accompanied the high-profile names, a whiff of concern arose over the protocol that accompanies New Milford's increasing presence as a film destination.

In the state, the industry's growth was spurred by legislation the General Assembly passed in 2006, enacting video tax credits that have been termed the most aggressive in the nation. Since that time, New Milford has been the site of an American Express commercial, among others, as well as a Tim Allen vehicle entitled "The Six Wives of Henry Lefay," in addition to the independent venture of Ms. Miller, the daughter of the late playwright and Roxbury resident Arthur Miller.

Simultaneous with Ms. Miller, horror film guru Wes Craven, whose "Nightmare on Elm Street" series gave the genre's aficionados the inimitable character of Freddy Krueger, was also filming in the area.

Last Thursday, according to one crew member, he was filming in Kent. Reportedly, Mr. Craven canceled his plans to film in New Milford last Friday, when the "Pippa Lee" crew and cast held sway for much of the day inside the 59 Bank restaurant.

Town Councilman John Lillis, for one, had expressed concern that New Milford residents were receiving insufficient notice of street closures or potential traffic delays at a town council meeting April 28, when location director and former New Milford resident Ellen Athena Catsikeas came before the council to request its approval for a street closure May 1.

On an individual basis, downtown merchants received a more extensive schedule for the film, complete with scheduled hours of filming, the afternoon of the day before filming began. Persons used to traversing the Railroad Street parking lot found diminished space there on Tuesday of this week, when filming took place for part of a day.

"I've heard no complaints," said Trip Rothschild, president of the Village Center Organization and owner of the home and lifestyle store boutique Homeward Bound, where actress Jenna Elfman, who was featured in the "Six Wives" production, had shopped.

"We've definitely seen some people from the shoot," he said, when asked if the Pippa Lee cast or crew had visited his shop. "They don't have a lot of time. They're busy. They've been in and out," he added, noting that Ms. Miller, who continues to live in Roxbury, has been a very good customer over time.

"I park there every day without a problem," he said of the use of the Railroad Street parking lot for part of one day as a set. "It's just a question of moving a few feet back for a couple of days. We have to be flexible. How much inconvenience is there? Did it really inconvenience anyone in a major way? Of course not," he said of the protocol observed by that sector of the movie industry that has come New Milford's way.

"On a short-term basis, it's marginal," he said of the benefit downtown merchants have derived from films. "On a long-term basis, if they like New Milford and come back, it's a good thing," he said of the industry's presence in the town broadly.

No New Milford resident, whether public official or private citizen, hinted at discouraging films from coming to the town, in part because they generate revenues.

The Tim Allen film, for instance, put roughly \$80,000 into the area, according to Tom Esposito, who chairs the town's Film Commission. Mr. Esposito, said the arrival of Mr. Craven's film, which is tentatively titled "25/8," could result in a gain for the town of \$500,000, given the combined use of hotels, restaurants, catering halls, purchases and donations. "You've got 80 to 100 people living in the area for three weeks," Mr. Esposito,

who also serves on the Economic Development Commission, said.
"I think it's exciting for New Milford," said resident and Village Center Organization member Pat Hembrook of the filming that takes place here, although she emphasized she is out of the town for professional reasons during the day. "It was well publicized ahead of time," she said of the locations the "Pippa Lee" film used.
"One of the girls did see Keanu Reeves," said Michelle Lukse of the New Milford Youth Agency, whose catering and youth facility, The Maxx, was among the locations "Pippa Lee" used. "He's cuter in person than on film," she said, repeating what she had heard. "Apparently, he looked really good in real life."
It remains to be seen how New Milford will look on "Six Wives," "Pippa Lee" and "25/8."

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