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LOCAL

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Washington's film production revenue drops sharply

By RACHEL LA CORTE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The state's film lovers want to see more of the Evergreen State on the silver screen -- and less of its neighbor to the north or states to the south as cheaper stand-ins.

The state has lost millions of dollars in potential production revenue to nearby Vancouver, B.C., which offers a favorable exchange rate on the dollar and significantly more incentives to lure film, TV and commercial production from the United States.

But Vancouver isn't the only threat. States such as Louisiana and New Mexico are offering top incentives to budget-conscious productions and are winning the bidding war to replicate Anywhere, U.S.A.

"It has become increasingly competitive and gone from location-based competition to cost-based competition -- where can I get the cheapest place to film my movie," said Suzy Kellett, director for the Washington State Film Office.

Washington state has experienced a 70 percent drop in production levels, from a high of \$50.5 million in 2000 to \$12.6 million in 2003.

Those leading the charge to sell the state's film appeal are hoping lawmakers will help.

A task force of several businesses and people with a direct interest in a thriving film market have hired a lobbyist and are in the process of working on an incentive package to be introduced during next year's legislative session. The recommendations are expected to be released in a few months.

"A number of us believe strongly that if we set up the right number of incentives, there are a number of films that would love to shoot here," said Don Jensen, president of Alpha Cine Labs in Seattle, who helped organize the task force. "The natural environment is great, we have good people, all of those things are in place."

Jensen, whose Seattle-based company processes motion picture film and makes prints, said hotels, restaurants and lumber yards all benefit from a production in town.

"There can be millions and millions of dollars on each film spent in those places," he said.

But for local businesses to benefit, productions have to come here. Currently, the state's incentives fall short of what other states are offering. Production companies here are exempt from some production and post-production sales and use taxes, and they don't have to pay hotel taxes for stays longer than 30 days.

However, many say it's impossible for the state to compete when states such as Louisiana have upped the ante with packages of exemptions and tax rebates. In 2002, Louisiana began offering a 15 percent rebate on the cost of movie and TV productions valued at \$8 million or more. The move created hundreds of new jobs and \$375 million in revenue for the state in 2004. This year, lawmakers there increased the rebate to 25 percent of production costs spent in Louisiana.

Several states have joined Louisiana in making a hard push for getting productions to their state, including New Mexico, which expanded a tax credit for film companies for a portion of their direct production expenses in the state.

Kellett said Washington state needs to offer a similar type of discount to lure the dollars she knows are out there.

"We need to do something much bigger," she said. "We're going to dig deep and create something innovative that can put us back in the game nationally."

Kellett's office has been at risk of losing funding three times over the past decade, with Gov. Christine Gregoire and former Gov. Gary Locke expressing concern that the cost



Actress Jeanette Maus, makeup artist Christina Schock and director David Shulman laugh as they work on the Seattle independent film "World Enough and Time" last week. Fewer movies are shooting in Washington, lured away by cash incentives offered in Canada and other states.



Movie set grips David Pickar, left, and Bruce Henderson, on the truck, unload lighting equipment last week for the locally produced film "World Enough and Time." Washington's production levels have fallen 70 percent since 2000, losing jobs and millions in revenue.

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