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We ought to be in pictures

Million-dollar movie is the kind of project Oregon hopes to lure

By AMANDA PENNELLY Issue date: Fri, Jul 16, 2004

The Tribune

Gov. Ted Kulongoski stretched out his hand to Hollywood this week, as independent production company Whitewater Films announced officially what inner Northeast neighbors have known for weeks:

Stumptown again has been transformed into Tinseltown.

Or, in the case of this \$1 million project, New Jersey.

Large semitrucks and bundles of cables and cameras have crowded the area around an otherwise unassuming Irvington home to film "Nearing Grace" — a movie about an outlandish Jersey teenager struggling with his mother's death.

Gregory Smith (of TV series "Everwood" fame) stars in the film, along with David Morse ("The Green Mile"), Jordana Brewster ("The Fast and the Furious") and Ashley Johnson ("What Women Want").

This is Whitewater's second filming endeavor in Oregon in the past two years, Whitewater producer Susan Johnson said Wednesday. The production company filmed "Mean Creek" along the swampy Lewis and Clackamas rivers last year.

"It really came down to familiarity with the crew," said Johnson, who added that about 60 percent of those working on the film are Oregonians. "The no-sales-tax thing also helped us a lot."

Luring Hollywood north has been on Oregon's agenda for the last few years, according to Kulongoski, who met with film industry representatives in Los Angeles in 2003 to see how the state could make itself a serious movie contender.

"Films are a clean industry and a tremendous economic driver," the governor said.

The Oregon Film and Video Office — the organization that oversees Oregon film projects — plans to beef up its ability to entice smaller productions like "Nearing Grace" when the Oregon Production Investment Fund goes into effect in 2005, said the office's executive director, Veronica Rinard.

The fund will give a 10 percent rebate, up to \$250,000 per film or \$30,000 per TV episode, to production companies for any spending they do in Oregon.

"It's funded by giving tax credits to people — any private investors — who contribute to the fund," Rinard said.

But because of the rebate cap, it's difficult for Oregon to go after the bigger films.

To respond to that setback, Oregon Film is in the middle of launching a three-part project called Greenlight Oregon.

Louisiana's a leader

According to Rinard, the first piece of Greenlight Oregon gives filmmakers a 10 percent rebate from the state on money they spend on local vendors for things like set design, catering and other filming supplies.

Phase two of Greenlight, a labor rebate, will be introduced to state legislators next session. A loan program — where the state would piggyback on loans already given to filmmakers — is in its formative stages and makes up the final phase of the project.

But even with all these new film industry incentives, Oregon won't be leading the pack for film locales anytime soon. Louisiana, for example, played host to 16 movies over the last year and a half — Oregon boasts five.

"Oregon doesn't have the political will to do what they're doing," Rinard said, referring to states such as Louisiana that actually lose money on some of their movie deals.

A matter of economy

Rinard conceded that there is some concern about Oregon getting into a bidding war in which the state could lose its moneymaking edge, but she said Oregon's relationship with Hollywood is one that will create revenue.

"I won't ask for something if we don't get anything back. There comes a point when the bidding stops because the partnership no longer makes economic sense," she said.

"None of the Greenlight projects cost the state fund anything — they are all revenue neutral."

In the meantime, smaller film projects like "Nearing Grace" are finding a niche here.

"Each Greenlight project makes it easier to come to Oregon," said Rick Rosenthal, director of "Nearing Grace."

The governor said that the state has put \$100,000 from various sources into "Nearing Grace."

And Whitewater Films already has four scripts in the works, said producer Susan Johnson.

"We're definitely looking at Oregon," she said. "We're even looking at rewriting one of the scripts so we can actually call it Portland."