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## Boosters hope Alaska will be "Hollywood Far North"

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By Yereth Rosen

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (Reuters) - On a crisp autumn day, as office workers went about their business, one of Anchorage's major hotels became the temporary hub of what state leaders consider a promising new Alaska industry.

The lower level of the Hotel Captain Cook was occupied by a Hollywood film crew that converted rooms into movie sets, makeup and dressing areas and equipment-packed work sites.

In progress was filming for Universal Features' "Everybody Loves Whales," a movie starring Drew Barrymore and recounting a 1988 rescue mounted for three gray whales trapped in Arctic ice.

In a departure from past history, this Alaska-based movie is being filmed on location, rather than in a make-believe Alaska set constructed in British Columbia or elsewhere.

Alaska officials hope this and other projects will help diversify the state's economy from its precarious dependence on dwindling oil production.

"We wouldn't be 'Hollywood North.' Vancouver claims that. We'd be 'Hollywood Far North,'" said state Senator Johnny Ellis, an Anchorage Democrat and self-professed movie buff who authored 2008 legislation that established a special tax credit for big film projects and revived a state film office that had been eliminated during a past austerity push.

Ellis' measure entitles film companies spending \$100,000 or more in Alaska to transferable credits of 30 percent of those costs, plus 10 percent of money spent hiring Alaskans. Extra credits are given for expenditures in rural areas or outside of the summer tourist season.

Film companies in the past have largely avoided Alaska, citing the state's high costs, remoteness and overall inconvenience.

But the tax incentive has made a difference, said David Linck, unit publicist for "Everybody Loves Whales," a project Ellis refers to as "Northern Exposure Meets Free Willy."

"It's dollars and cents," Linck said.

Filming will run through November, he said. It has been an economic boon to Alaska, with several key roles filled by Alaska Natives selected after casting calls in remote rural sites, he said.

Among those sharing in the bounty is Su Gamble, owner of a hair salon in an Anchorage strip mall the producers selected for three days of filming because of its retro-1980s look. Gamble herself was cast as an extra, an experience that still thrills her.

"It's such a blast that they chose my place, and they chose me," she said.

### OSCAR HEADED NORTH?

She recounted the two hours crew members spent creating her 1980s big-hair look, proclaimed the film producer and crew "so sweet" and "so patient," and predicted an Academy Award for the project.

"Drew Barrymore's going to be the best actress for the year 2012," she said.

It will be several years before Alaska is able to develop its own industry support system, with skilled workers and specialized contractors, anywhere on par with what exists in British Columbia, said Mike Devlin, chief executive of Los Angeles-based Evergreen Films.

Still, each new project moves the state incrementally toward that standard, he said.

"Every film means some Alaskans are in on the production," he said.

Evergreen Films is so bullish on Alaska it has located a studio in Anchorage. The studio occupies a vast and elegant house perched in the mountains overlooking the city, glacier-fed Cook Inlet and a panorama of snowy mountains, including active volcanoes and Mount McKinley.

The studio doubles as Devlin's residence.

"I'd rather get up in the morning here than in L.A.," he quipped, taking in the view from a bank of windows.

Evergreen Films has produced nature documentaries, among other projects, and is working on a television series based on mystery novels by Alaska author Dana Stabenow.

Last month, NANA Corp., owned by Inupiat Eskimos from the state's northwestern region, announced it was investing in a joint venture with Evergreen. The project will "create jobs and economic growth," a NANA statement said.

Alaska already is experiencing a boomlet in reality-TV productions such as "The Deadliest Catch," the fishing series produced by the Discovery Channel, and former Gov. Sarah Palin's controversial series being produced by TLC.

"Alaska is the talk of the nation, in many ways, good and bad. But most of it good," Ellis said.

For some Alaskans, the desire to lure film projects goes beyond money.

Hollywood's habit of using non-Alaska sites to film Alaska stories -- even the iconic television series "Northern Exposure," which was filmed in Washington state -- has long been an irritant.

Some on-screen results made Alaskans cringe. Pine forests and wooded hillsides stood in for what was supposed to be open Arctic tundra. Asian actors portrayed Alaska Natives. And there were improbable story lines, like running gags about snake problems in the reptile-free far north.

The final insult, said Ellis, was learning that a major romantic comedy starring Sandra Bullock was being filmed in Massachusetts even though the story was set in Sitka, Alaska.

"That aggravated me, and it aggravated others," the senator said, referring to "the Proposal," released in 2009. "There's a long, sad history of Alaska losing out. But I hope we're starting to change that."

(Editing by Steve Gorman)

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