

More films could be made in Maine under new proposal

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By Ray Routhier

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In the recent CBS All Access series based on Stephen King's "The Stand," which premiered in late 2020, locations in western Canada stood in for Ogunquit. *Photo by Robert Falconer/CBS*

Every time a movie based on a Stephen King book gets made in Massachusetts or Canada or anywhere that isn't Maine, people want to know why more films and TV shows aren't shot here.

It's a question King himself raised last month with a tweet lamenting that several recent film and TV adaptations of his work were filmed outside of Maine, including the Hulu series "Castle Rock," shot in the old mill town of Orange, Massachusetts, instead of an old mill town in Maine.

"What's wrong with Maine? Let's get some film production going here," [King posted on Twitter](#) March 18. The post got 32,000 likes and was retweeted more than 1,700 times.

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The short answer to why more major films or TV shows aren't made in Maine is that the overall cost of production is often much less in other places. States like Massachusetts, Georgia and New York offer lucrative financial incentives to film companies, usually as tax credits and rebates, worth far more than those offered in Maine. But a bill submitted to the state Legislature in late March would increase the financial incentives in what its proponents say is an effort to attract a steady stream of moderately priced productions and create jobs for film professionals in Maine as well as other people that the film and TV crews would need to hire. They hope it would create a film industry within the state.

“This is about jobs, because most of the people working on a film set are carpenters or electricians or caterers,” said Andrea Isaacs, a longtime Hollywood film executive who was in charge of production for the “Twilight” movies and is a former member of the Maine Film Commission and former resident of the state. “The people making movies want to put the most they can on screen for the least amount of money. If the incentives are there, I think Maine could definitely attract more (productions).”



Kennebunkport actor Erik Van Wyck is working to promote a bill that would offer larger incentives to filmmakers to come to Maine, hopefully on a more consistent basis. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

The bill, L.D. 1334, is aimed at making Maine more competitive with other states, but the incentives offered would not be enough to lure most big-budget Hollywood films with stars in every role, said Erik Van Wyck, a Kennebunkport-based actor, producer and teacher who is the driving force behind the bill. The incentives proposed are designed to be most attractive to films with a budget of \$5 million to \$8 million, while for the past decade or two Maine has mostly attracted lower-budget indie films, often costing \$500,000 or less. Van Wyck and others have created a website called Picture Maine to plead the case for why increased incentives would help create more filmmaking and associated jobs here.

The bill, though largely the idea of Van Wyck, is being sponsored in the Legislature by Rep. Suzanne Salisbury, D-Westbrook. The bill was referred to the Taxation Committee on March 30 but has not yet been scheduled for a hearing. Exactly how much the bill would cost or how much it would bring into the state is unclear right now, since it's hard to estimate how many productions it might attract.

TRYING TO BE MORE COMPETITIVE

Currently Maine offers a 10-12 percent wage rebate – for people from inside or outside the state – as well as a 5 percent tax credit on production spending. The changes proposed by L.D. 1334 include raising the wage reimbursement, in the form of a tax credit, to 25 percent for residents and 20 percent for nonresidents, but only for “below the line” workers, not producers or star actors. The bill would also create a 25 percent tax credit for all production spending in the state. Both tax credits would be refundable at a rate of 95 cents on the dollar.

If a film company spent \$300,000 on eligible wages and about \$600,000 on eligible production costs under the bill's parameters, it would get about \$174,000 back. The bill would limit the amount of tax credits available to \$500,000 per project in the first year, but that would increase to \$1 million in 2026. Massachusetts offers 25 percent credits on all spending, cashable at 90 percent, but with no cap, according to that state's film office.

So a very big-budget movie, of say \$100 million, would be capped at \$500,000 in tax credits in Maine but not in Massachusetts. Other states, including New York, have no cap on the amount of tax credits a film can get. Canada offers a 25 percent refundable tax credit on qualified labor expenses, also with no limit.

Big tax credits for films have been controversial in some states where they are given. Some lawmakers in Massachusetts have called for the incentives to be rolled back, saying the expense to the state is too high. The Boston Globe reported that state had issued \$90 million in film tax subsidies in 2016.

If Maine ended up giving out \$2 million in tax credits – according to the guidelines of the bill – that would mean film companies had spent between \$12 million and \$20 million directly on their productions here, Van Wyck estimates. But spending money on Maine hotel rooms,

transportation, carpenters, caterers, hardware stores and other businesses would have a larger economic effect overall, Salisbury, Van Wyck and others say.

Van Wyck and other promoters of the bill say they are trying to build a consistent film industry in Maine, so people here can work on films regularly, and the bill is written so that incentives are only offered on spending in Maine and wages paid to Maine people. Unlike the incentives in some states, the bill proposed in Maine would make the salaries of out-of-state producers, executives and star actors ineligible for financial incentives.



“The Lighthouse” is an example of a mid-budget movie that was set in Maine but filmed in Canada. *Photo by Eric Chakeen courtesy of A24*

A list of films made in Maine compiled by the Maine Film Office shows that in the past 20 years there have been few major movies shot here, the kind you might see at local theaters or on TV networks. Some scenes of the 2014 HBO miniseries “Olive Kitteridge,” based on the novel by Maine writer Elizabeth Strout, were filmed around Camden, and the 2005 HBO series “Empire Falls,” by Maine writer Richard Russo, was filmed extensively in Waterville, Skowhegan, Kennebunkport and Ogunquit.

New incentives designed to attract films in the \$5 million to \$8 million range likely won't bring in a lot of King's works or other big-budget movies. Recent film versions of his work, including "Pet Sematary," "Doctor Sleep" and "It," all had budgets of about \$20 million and up. Among living authors, it's hard to find another whose work has been made into more films and TV projects, with more than 75 made over the years.

King, in an interview from his Florida winter home last week, said he has little to do with where his stories get filmed, since production companies buy the film rights and then have to decide on costs, locations and other factors. But he would like to see more of his films made here, and thinks with increased incentives Maine might attract some of his TV projects.

In the 1980s and '90s, before New York, Canada and other places started offering major incentives, at least portions of several King stories were shot in Maine. These include: the original "Pet Sematary," with crucial scenes filmed in the town of Hancock; "Graveyard Shift," with filming around Bangor and central Maine; the original ABC miniseries version of "The Stand," with locations in Ogunquit; "The Langoliers," an ABC TV series, shot partly at Bangor International Airport; "Thinner," shot on the midcoast; and the ABC-TV miniseries "Storm of the Century," which was filmed mostly in Southwest Harbor, on Mount Desert Island. King said the latter is his favorite of his stories shot in Maine. He said the small-town look, ocean vistas and Maine weather all helped to give it a very authentic feel.



Rebecca Hall and Jason Sudeikis in a scene from “Tumbledown.” The 2015 film was set in Farmington and written by a Maine couple, but filmed in Massachusetts because of financial incentives. *Photo courtesy of “Tumbledown.”*

In recent years, several films in the \$5 million to \$8 million budget range that were set in Maine were filmed elsewhere, with the filmmakers citing higher tax incentives as the main reason. One was the 2015 romantic comedy “Tumbledown,” written by Portland filmmakers Desi Van Til and Sean Mewshaw and set in Van Til’s hometown of Farmington. The film title comes from nearby Tumbledown Mountain. The couple really wanted to make the movie in Maine, but when it came time to get financing, their financial backers wanted to take advantage of higher tax credits in Massachusetts. So Concord, Massachusetts, was made up by set designers to stand in for Farmington. The film starred Jason Sudeikis, a former “Saturday Night Live” cast member, and was released to theaters nationally.

“There’s no question it would have been easier for us to make that film here, if incentives (like those proposed in the bill) were in place,” Mewshaw said last week.

Another recent movie set in Maine but filmed elsewhere, with a budget of about \$4 million, was the murky 2019 drama “The Lighthouse,” starring Willem Dafoe and Robert Pattinson. It’s set on a remote Maine island in the 1890s, and director Robert Eggers, a New Hampshire native, said the dialogue was heavily influenced by the work of Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett. The film was shot in Nova Scotia, to take advantage of the tax rebate.

Eggers told the Press Herald in 2019 that, while he would have liked to film in Maine, “unfortunately, it just makes so much more sense, financially, to film in Canada.”

Films that do get made in Maine often cost around \$500,000 or less. Sometimes those are made by people from Maine. One recent example is “Downeast,” a gritty crime story filmed in Portland in 2020. It stars Scarborough native Greg Finley, a veteran Hollywood actor. Edwin Stevens, the film’s cinematographer and a producer, is from Kennebunk originally.



The movie “Downeast,” with a budget of about \$500,000, was filmed around Portland in early 2020. A bill in the Legislature is aimed at attracting larger-budget productions, in the range of \$5 million to \$8 million.

Photo by Jasper Lowe

NEW TWIST ON OLD IDEA

Van Wyck, 45, got the idea to propose a film incentive bill when he was working on a film in 2016 around Biddeford called “Holly Star,” as an actor and co-producer. The film, a romantic comedy set in a small Maine town at Christmastime, was made for less than \$500,000 and distributed through streaming services. Van Wyck had moved to Maine in 2015 as part of a “lifestyle” decision. He had made appearances as an actor over the years on TV shows like “Cougar Town,” “How I Met Your Mother,” “Castle” and “Cold Case.” While working on “Holly Star,” he said, Biddeford’s economic development director, Dan Stevenson, suggested that Van Wyck look at putting together a bill on film incentives as a way to bring a new industry and more jobs to Maine towns.

Stevenson, now the development director in Westbrook, said he was struck to see during the filming of “Holly Star” how many different local businesses were hired to do work. As someone who had made his career in economic development for the state and towns, he thought film-related jobs seemed to be an untapped resource.

The idea of offering more incentives to film in Maine is not new. At least four previous bills to increase film incentives have been proposed over the last dozen years or so, including by Gov. Janet Mills when she was a state representative more than a decade ago. Mills wouldn’t comment directly on the current bill, but her press secretary, Lindsay Crete, said in an email to the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram that Mills “believes legislation to create film tax incentives should receive due consideration by the Legislature, including the experiences of other states, the potential cost to the General Fund, and its economic return.”

Other legislators who have filed bills in the past say they have failed for a variety of reasons, including a perception that giving financial incentives to filmmakers would be essentially giving money to rich Hollywood producers and their stars. There was usually little discussion of the jobs the incentives might produce. Sen. Susan Deschambault, D-Biddeford, sponsored a bill two years ago, which was also researched and mostly written by Van Wyck.

“I think these bills have failed because the legislators don’t want to be seen as subsidizing Steven Spielberg or the airplanes the producers use, but this is about spending money in Maine,” said Deschambault.

Salisbury, the current bill’s sponsor, hopes that when legislators consider her bill, they’ll talk about the specific cost-benefit of offering tax incentives that could bring jobs to all parts of the state and provide work for a wide variety of people, from carpenters to drivers to nurses to cooks. Salisbury said that since proposing the bill, she’s gotten calls from Mainers who have made films, or worked on films, expressing their desire to see a more consistent film industry established here.

“I was looking at the governor’s plan for the growth of jobs in Maine, and it seemed to me this was one area we could bring in jobs. We have a great workforce, beautiful scenery and a lot to offer,” said Salisbury, who won election to her office last year. “The focus of this isn’t getting a big-budget movie made here, it’s about the benefit it can bring to the people and the towns of the state.”

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