

More business would put stress on reduced film office staffs

BY SCOTT E. PACHECO

The impact of budget cuts to local film offices so far hasn't been felt much by the industry, but those involved say paradoxically that if business gets better things could get worse.

The budget cut "has affected someone, but not film," said Robert Parente, director of the Miami office of film and cultural affairs, which lost two full-time employees and its \$245,000 line item during the recent cut.

"I had to prioritize.... My number-one priority is the film permitting process - getting filmmakers what they need to work," he said. "Whatever time is left over I then try to do some of things in cultural affairs that I did before," such as the Miami Book Fair International, film festivals and partnering with the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau to promote events and programs.

Jeff Peel, director of the Miami-Dade film office, agreed that

film services have continued to be maintained even as cuts have taken place. The Miami-Dade office lost its "number-two" person, former director of marketing Annie Perez, to budget cuts.

"There is just stuff we can't do," he said. "One of the things that we really like to do is support seminars and initiatives. That's one of things that's gone by wayside. That's unfortunate and hopefully at some point" it will be restored.

Instead, the focus has remained on client services, Mr. Peel said, which has paid off recently with Miami landing a major Bollywood production.

He said producers of the movie indicated the service they received in Miami made a big difference in the production coming here despite the absence of a film incentive.

But where film may suffer is if a new incentive for filming is passed, local film officials say, and if business then

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picks up above current levels it could create a precarious situation.

Mr. Parente right now is under the city manager's budget and has only a part-time aide. He said in a month or two his hands will be full with Emmy-award winning television series *Burn Notice* and the Bollywood production, and another project would severely strain his office.

"I'm going to be a real popular guy in February and March - I am going into uncharted waters," he said. "Right now if

something other major came in I'd have to go to the manager and reassess the situation.

"But we should have such problems."

Graham Winick, film and event production manager with Miami Beach, said passage of a \$75 million a year tax credit incentive - currently being worked on with hopes of introduction in the Legislature in 2010 - would change the game but also create the problems Mr. Parente mentioned.

"If we get fortunate enough to get all the work back, I fear if we don't have the infrastructure in our film offices to handle that workload it's essentially a bait and switch," Mr. Winick said. "There's going to have to be a real argument that all of our offices need to staff up a bit" if the incentive goes through.

He said if the incentive becomes reality and film offices can't handle the demand for services, Miami could earn a moniker of being not film-

friendly.

Sam Tedesco, a location manager who has worked on major studio films in Miami such as "Bad Boys," "There's Something About Mary," "Out of Time" and "2 Fast 2 Furious," has said that the film office is much more than just "answering the phone and filling out a permit."

"They're invaluable - the film office is basically our partner in making a movie," Mr. Tedesco said in September.

Mr. Peel said previously that at a certain point the local cuts are really going to slice into business, and that at a point local offices won't be able to do more with less. He said now is not the time to under-appreciate the film industry.

"There's certainly some truth to the saying that you don't know what you got 'til it's gone," he said. "Maybe this industry has been a little bit taken for granted."