

# 'Rain Man' director Levinson pushes for film incentives

By BEN NUCKOLS

Associated Press Writer

ANNAPOLIS (AP) — Maryland is losing its homegrown movie industry to other states that give deeper discounts to filmmakers, director Barry Levinson said Tuesday.

Levinson — director of "Diner," "Rain Man" and "Wag the Dog" — came to Annapolis to advocate for a revamped film incentive program he said would make Maryland competitive with states like Connecticut and Pennsylvania, which have handed out hundreds of millions of dollars in tax credits in recent years.

When Hollywood producers decide where to shoot their movies, "Maryland is not in the mix at this particular time, even though we had a great tradition and a very strong base here," Levinson said.

Levinson, a Baltimore native, helped establish Maryland's base of film-industry professionals in the 1980s with Baltimore-set films including "Diner" and "Tin Men." Baltimore was also home to two long-running TV series, "Homicide: Life on the Street" and "The Wire," that kept crews busy through the 1990s and much of this decade.

But Maryland has struggled to attract major movies or TV series since "The Wire" concluded its run last year. "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," a \$150 million production that was

honored last week with 13 Academy Award nominations, was originally planned for Baltimore, but was rewritten to take place in Louisiana because of the state's generous incentive program.

Maryland currently offers cash rebates to movies and TV shows that shoot in the state, but the program is capped at \$4 million in the current fiscal year, down from nearly \$7 million in previous years. That means one movie can eat up the majority of the available rebate money.

"My One and Only," a Renee Zellweger period piece that shot in the Baltimore area last summer, claimed \$3 million in rebates, according to data from the state Department of Business and Economic Development.

The legislation pushed by Levinson and other business and film-industry leaders would establish a tax credit similar to what's offered in Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Louisiana. Instead of giving producers a cash rebate up front, Maryland would hand out credits valued at 28 percent of what a production spends in the state.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said he would consider the idea if it could be shown that the tax credits would create jobs and stimulate the economy.

"We've got to promote economic development, even in tough fiscal times," Miller

said.

Despite the fact that Maryland would ultimately have to forfeit tax revenue, a revamped incentive package would be an economic stimulus, said Delegate Melony Griffith, D-Prince George's, one of the bill's sponsors.

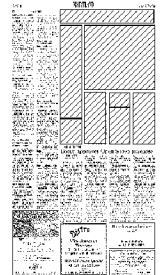
"This is about creating opportunities for people to get to work who haven't been to work in this state for a while," Griffith said.

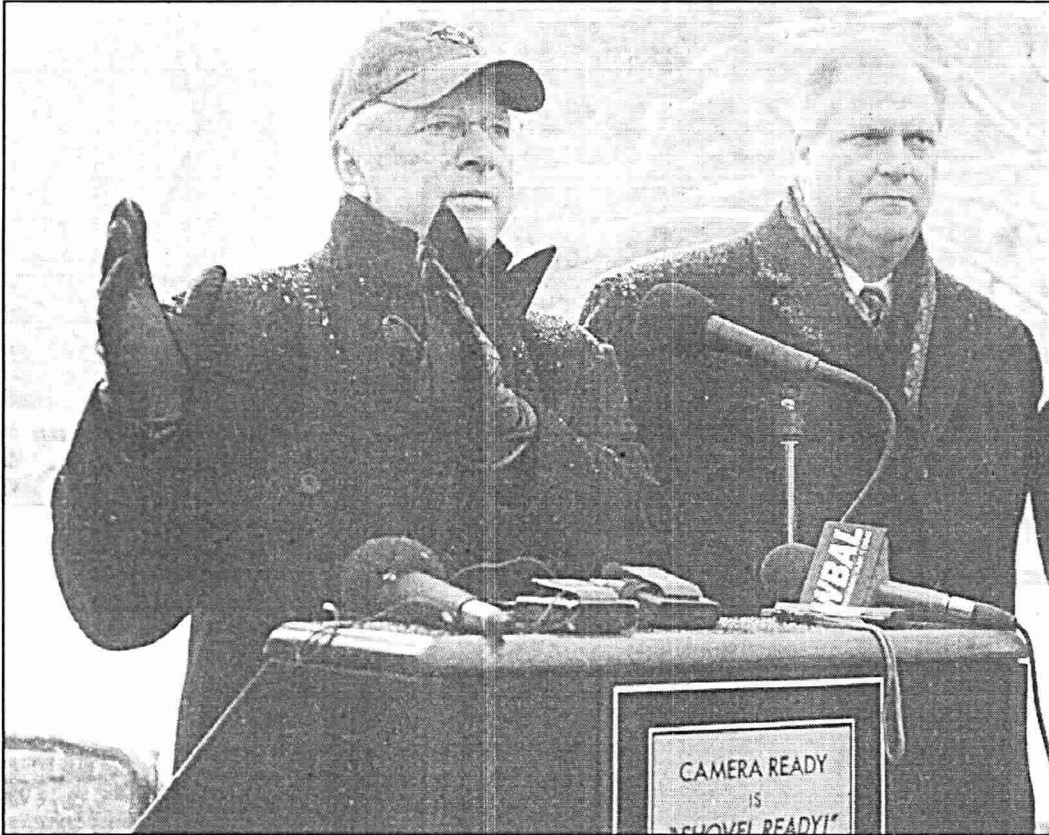
Several academic studies have questioned whether film incentives are truly beneficial to states' finances. A study released late last year by the Arrowhead Center at New Mexico State University found that New Mexico only gets 14 cents in tax revenue for every dollar it spends on tax rebates for film productions. Gov. Bill Richardson criticized the study, saying it did not take into account all the money that filmmaking had generated, including money spent to build studios.

For Levinson, the quest for incentives is more personal. He shot his 2006 political satire "Man of the Year" in Toronto even though it was set in Maryland and Washington, D.C.

"It breaks my heart for me to write a movie that takes place here, and I can't even shoot in the state where it should take place," Levinson said.

*Associated Press writer Kathleen Miller contributed to this report.*





AP PHOTO/ROB CARR

Director Barry Levinson, left, and Donald Fry, president of the Greater Baltimore Committee, appear Tuesday during a news conference in Annapolis advocating film incentives that would make Maryland more competitive with other states.