

On Location: Nipping at the heels of runaway production

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When it comes to local production, L.A. may not have much to bark about these days, but it can at least count "Beverly Hills Chihuahua 2" among the few movies shooting locally.

A direct-to-DVD sequel to the hit Walt Disney movie has been filming heavily throughout the L.A. area, including at a mansion in Beverly Hills and the Church of the Angels in Pasadena (where the critters get married, of course).

This week the crew will film at Union Station and at a warehouse in Sun Valley, where a dog-show scene will be filmed. The production employs about 100 people, unusually large for a low-budget film. Credit the little dogs.

"Because of the dogs, every animal has to have one handler," said location manager Curtis Collins. "In one scene we have 21 dogs."

"Beverly Hills Chihuahua 2" sniffed out L.A. over other locales after qualifying for help from the state's film tax credit program. The film, which has a budget of more than \$10 million, qualified to receive a credit totaling \$1.9 million.

Since the state program debuted July 1, the California Film Commission has approved nearly 40 projects and committed more than \$100 million in tax credits (the state allocated \$500 million over five years).

However, the program so far has had minimal effect on boosting overall production, which remains in the doldrums thanks to an industry wide slowdown and the migration of projects to states and countries with more aggressive tax breaks.

In fact, on-location filming activity dropped 31% last week compared to the same period ago, with declines across all categories (see accompanying chart). The drop is all the more steep given that feature production virtually ground to a halt this time last year.

"Yes, our numbers are down, but that only serves to confirm that the action the state took was necessary," said Todd Lindgren, spokesman for FilmL.A.

Amy Lemisch, director of the California Film Commission, said the tax credit program is in its infancy.

"The reason we're not starting to skew FilmL.A.'s numbers is because it's still too early," Lemisch said. "Most of the projects haven't started production yet."

-- Richard Verrier