



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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OUT-OF-STATE FILM SUBSIDIES ARE A HOUSE OF CARDS

By Jessica Fulton

Many Washingtonians spent this winter binge-watching the Netflix show, House of Cards. (And, if you're like me, you now take a few steps back from the Metro platform.) We know there's no such thing as a Cathedral Heights station and that Freddy's BBQ is in Baltimore, not on Martin Luther King Avenue SE in DC. And given the economics of film production, I'm just fine with that.

As excited as I would be to catch a glimpse of Kevin Spacey on my way to work near the Capitol, I know that spending a lot to lure out-of-town film companies to film in DC – and then leave with all of their talent—isn't a smart long-term investment for DC. Instead, it would be better to make targeted investments to nurture our local film industry, supporting local creative talent and encouraging it to stay here.

When the company that produces House of Cards found out that Maryland's film incentive fund would have less than \$8 million for the show's third season – they got \$26 million for the first two seasons -- they balked. The company [threatened](#) to move their production elsewhere. And in House of Cards style, they brought in Frank Underwood himself [to woo the legislators](#).

The strategy worked, but it's questionable what Maryland taxpayers won. Last week, the Maryland Senate agreed to increase the film incentive fund to the tune of \$18.5 million. But [studies](#) show that the expense is not worth it, that film subsidies don't generate enough activity to justify their cost.

A [study](#) on DC's film industry found the city should invest in homegrown film and video production instead of luring out of town talent. Local filmmakers produced \$212 million of work in fiscal year 2012, much more than the \$24 million produced by out of state filmmakers. The city's Film Economic Incentive Fund, holds just under \$4 million, too little by most accounts to attract a major show like House of Cards. But that funding could help DC residents create shows, films, and provide pre- and post-production services right here in the District. Local filmmakers could see their productivity grow, and with it jobs and economic development across the District. The DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development recently began taking steps to help locals in the creative industry, and by many accounts the efforts are going well.

DC should take a step back from trying to compete with states with much larger budgets than ours and try to find other ways to boost economic development through the film industry.