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Big Apple is ready for its close-ups

By Paul Lieberman

NEW YORK — More than five years after former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani announced plans to build a "Hollywood-style" studio at the old Brooklyn Navy Yard, a new city administration has declared the site ready for a major movie project: a big-screen version of Mel Brooks' hit musical, "The Producers."

In touting the film, which will be directed by Susan Stroman and will reunite the Broadway stars of the show, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, the current New York mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, and Gov. George E. Pataki also announced new tax breaks to keep more movie-making in New York, including the postproduction work and interior shooting now often done in Canada.

When the plan to build soundstages on the sprawling out-of-service Navy base on the Brooklyn waterfront was unveiled in 1999, actor Robert De Niro and Miramax Film Corp. co-founder Harvey Weinstein were principal figures in the project. But they since have been displaced by a partnership led by real estate developer Douglas C. Steiner, whose 15-acre Steiner Studios includes a 27,000-square-foot sound stage, billed as "the largest stage in the Northeast."

Brooks said at a Tuesday news conference that "the horrible truth is" that without the new incentives -- including a 10% state tax rebate for films on which 75% of the work is done in New York -- "The Producers: The Movie Musical" would have been shot "in the cheapest place in the world ... probably in Vancouver or someplace like that."

"The bottom line is that all those New York City wannabes ain't gonna be," Pataki said.

Under the Empire State Film Production Tax Credit, which Pataki signed into law last month, the state gives filmmakers a tax credit equal to 10% of the "qualified production costs," including expenditures for facilities, props, set construction and the salaries of the cast and crew, other than extras.

Shooting is set to start in February for the \$45-million film, with some high-profile additions to the Broadway cast: Nicole Kidman and Will Ferrell.