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The Chronicle Newspaper • Centralia, Wa.

Thursday, January 11, 2007

Alexander Introduces Equestrian-Center Bill

JOB CREATION: Five Democrats Co-Sponsor

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Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, introduced Wednesday his bill to create a public facilities district to help finance a proposed \$80 million equestrian center in Lewis County.

House Bill 1164 would create a district to collect state sales taxes to fund two-thirds of the Southwest Regional Equestrian Center, or REQ Center, a domed stadium that would host major rodeo and equestrian events.

The bill is co-sponsored by two other Republicans, including Rep. Richard DeBolt, R-Chehalis, and six Democrats. Alexander has said Democratic support was important to secure because that party holds a strong majority in the Legislature.

The bill was sent to the House Community Trade and Economic Development Committee, which is chaired by Rep. Phyllis Kenney, D-North Seattle.

"This is a terrific opportunity to bring some meaningful jobs and local revenues to Southwest Washington," Alexander said in a news release. "With the recent closure of the TransAlta facilities, we sure could use this shot in the arm."

A group of private investors, led by Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt, is still seeking out investors for the center. Hewitt said the group is seeking to fund the bill entirely with private dollars, "but we think it makes sense to seek some state help in light of the economic benefits this will bring to the whole area."

The center is expected to open in 2008 or 2009, depending on whether the group relies on public funding, according to Hewitt. The center would be built more quickly without public dollars, he said.

Plans for the REQ Center include a \$3.4 million learning center to provide a continuing education facility for equine and agricultural sciences, according to Hewitt.

Centralia College, Washington State University and Oregon State University have expressed interest in integrating their programs with such facilities, according to Hewitt.

Alexander said the bill would not create a tax because a public facilities district is designed to tap into existing state sales tax revenue.

At a legislative preview session with reporters, Gov. Chris Gregoire, a Democrat, expressed support for the concept of the equestrian center because of the potential to bring jobs to the Lewis County area following the closure of TransAlta's coal mine.

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