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Equestrian Center Stays on Steady Course

BILL FLIES THROUGH COMMITTEE: Concerns Remain About Public Financing of a Stadium

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Adam Amato / The Chronicle

OLYMPIA - A plan to build an equestrian center in Lewis County raced out of the chute in a Senate committee hearing Thursday, as lawmakers made the surprise move of passing the bill just after a hearing.

In a move that was loudly cheered by the audience, the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Rural Economic Development voted 5-0 to pass a bill to create a public facilities district in support of the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center.

"I am absolutely stunned by this," project manager Larry Hewitt said of the committee decision to pass Senate Bill 5390 so quickly.

American Made Rodeo Drill Team member Denise Vessey, Rochester, left, cheers comments made to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Thursday afternoon at the Capitol in Olympia during a hearing about the an equestrian center proposed for Winlock. With her were teammates Sherri Wright, Silver Creek, center, and Stacy Brody, Littlerock. The drill team has signed on to be the official drill team of the REQ Center.

SENATORS QUICKLY zeroed in on the potential for economic development with the 7,000-seat stadium, and on the difference between this proposal and efforts to build a new arena for the Seattle SuperSonics of the National Basketball Association.

Sen. Marilyn Rasmussen, the Democratic chair of the committee from Eatonville, said she was more willing to support the proposal because the facility could be used by others who don't draw multi-million dollar paychecks.

The center also has the potential to create attract an international audience for some kind of agricultural trade show involving Asian countries, said Sen. Paull Shin, who is Korean-American.

"Lewis County, I think, is an excellent place to build a REQ Center," Shin said. "When are you going to start?"

MEMBERS OF THE American Made Rodeo Drill Team, who signed on to become the official drill team of the equestrian center, made an appearance at the hearing in full cowgirl regalia, and they, too, contrasted the project with Seattle's basketball team.

"This would be a dream come true for drill team and horse people all over the United States. This is much better than spending money for a new Sonics stadium. They need to do a little winning first," said Denise Vessey, drill team manager.

THE BILL WOULD create a public facilities district, which would give the project access to two-thirds of the cost via a public bond, according to Hewitt. The additional one-third of the cost would come from private funding, though Hewitt has said his group is trying to pay for the whole project with private dollars.

The center, which would hold 7,000 people and would be located outside Winlock at exit 63 on Interstate 5, is expected to cost somewhere between \$50 million and \$80 million, he said.

A companion House bill, sponsored by Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, passed the House Community, Economic Development and Trade Committee earlier this week, and will next appear in the House Finance and Rules committees.

The bill also has a provision that would allow Lewis County to tax itself if more money is needed. Lewis County Commissioner Ron Averill, who spoke in favor of the House bill, said he "would avoid that option at all costs."

LAWMAKERS IN OLYMPIA, including Gov. Chris Gregoire, have greeted the equestrian-center plan with praise, especially after the economic blow the closure of the TransAlta coal mine gave to Lewis County.

Some people, though, are concerned about whether public financing should be used for a facility used primarily for entertainment.

Maureen Harkcom and Ken Olsen have been trying to build a similar-sized arena on their property in Ethel since the 1990s as part of Happs Inc., but have run into delays with obtaining permits for the land.

Instead, they host at least three rodeo events a week - and more in the spring and summer months - in their 38,000-square-foot training barn. Harkcom said in a telephone interview that she thinks the equestrian center is a good idea, but said she balks at public financing - especially when no one jumped to help the Happs stadium when she and Olsen were struggling with permitting.

The REQ Center is similar to the Happs plan, which is why Harkcom said she thinks it could work with private dollars. But, she said, she's talked with other groups in other parts of the state who have looked at similar projects with public funding, and said she's concerned that local groups will be priced out to keep the REQ Center afloat.

"Local people aren't going to be able to afford to use it," Harkcom said.

And if the REQ Center becomes too expensive, she said, she's worried that its proponents may not be able to fulfill their promises. Rules committees.

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"You don't dangle this in front of people, and then tell them, 'You can't have it now,'" Harkcom said.

HEWITT SAID permitting remains the biggest issue for the center. Winlock Mayor Cy Meyers has promised to help extend water and sewer facilities to the center, and Hewitt said he's planning to work with the city to expand its urban growth area to include the REQ Center.

"Challenges, yes," Hewitt said of the permitting, "but we've been doing a lot of work behind the scenes over the last year politically."

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