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## Horse Center Bill Beats Deadline in House

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**County Government and Environment reporter**

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OLYMPIA - Members waited until the second-to-last bill before an important cut-off date Wednesday afternoon, but the state House of Representatives passed legislation to help publicly fund an equestrian center outside Winlock.

In an 11th-hour move, the bill was sandwiched together with a proposal to build a stadium in Kent for its junior hockey league team, and the title was carefully crafted to prevent other lawmakers from amending the bill to include more controversial proposals to build public facilities for either the Seattle SuperSonics of the National Basketball Association or NASCAR, said Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, the bill's prime sponsor.

The deadline for all bills to pass their chamber of origin was Wednesday.

House Bill 2388 would provide public bonding for the 7,000-seat Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center and the Kent stadium. The REQ Center is expected to cost between \$55 million and \$80 million, and about \$8 million is expected to come from public coffers.

The bill passed 80-16, with two lawmakers absent. No legislators rose to speak in opposition on the House floor.

Similar legislation sponsored by Sen. Dan Swecker, R-Rochester, will likely be attached to the Senate budget, which is expected to see a vote later this month.

The bill gives Lewis County the option to create a nine-member public facilities district, which would own the arena but lease it to private management.

Alexander said the bill was recrafted Thursday at the request of Speaker of the House Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, who wanted to prevent any tinkering to allow Sonics or NASCAR measures to sneak in through the back door. Proposals to fund a new Sonics stadium in Renton or to build a major auto racetrack in Washington are stuck in committee, but they might not be dead because they involve the budget.

The title of the bill allows funding only for public facilities with a seating capacity of less than 10,000. Otherwise, the bill is an exact reflection of the original equestrian center and Kent arena bills.

"They weren't tight enough, in their mind, to ensure they wouldn't be exposed in the Senate or along the way," Alexander said.

He added that he was less concerned that a Sonics or NASCAR amendment could potentially sink the equestrian center bill and more concerned the bill would miss the cut-off deadline. However, Alexander said Chopp had given his

word and a handshake that the bill would come up for a vote.

"His word was good," Alexander said.

Larry Hewitt, project manager for the REQ Center, said he was pleased to avoid any association with the NASCAR track or the Sonics.

"Because we've had so much support for this bill, we've been a target for something like this," Hewitt said.

He added, "It shows the craftiness of Gary Alexander."

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