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## Landowner Is Still Hoping to Attract Horse Center


171 ACRES BETWEEN WINLOCK AND TOLEDO:  Development Needs Water

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RURAL TOLEDO - With the location of the proposed Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center undecided, Phil Smith is hoping to keep his 171 acres between Winlock and Toledo in the running.

Smith, 49, a Chehalis resident, was one of the earliest supporters of state legislation to create a public facilities district to help pay for the REQ Center, in large part because he hoped both he and the county could reap the benefits.

On Tuesday afternoon, Smith, wearing a red shirt bearing the REQ Center logo, held an impromptu gathering of a small group of REQ Center supporters and consultants he's hired to pore over a drawing of an equestrian arena on the site.

Richard Lundstrom, a consultant with Heery International, Tuesday explains a preliminary diagram of the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center and potential auxiliary businesses on the 171 acres between Winlock and Toledo owned by Phil Smith, pictured at left. Smith is trying to get water and sewer service to the property to attract the arena. Also pictured, starting right of Lundstrom, are Jess Winters, whose father, Dick Winters, owns property nearby, Winlock Mayor Cy Meyers and Dick Riley, a contract engineer for Winlock.

SMITH PURCHASED the land along Camus Road and Interstate 5 three years ago. He bought it for a song, \$300,000, from a mortgage company after the Skye Village project, which promised to bring a Scottish theme park to Exit 63 along Interstate 5, failed in the 1990s. Smith's land, he said, would have been the golf course.

Smith hopes this venture will be more successful than that failed project, and he's already begun clearing away and burning the brush and branches to prepare for development.

Even if it's not the horse center.

"It's easy to get on, easy to get off, and that's why the big money is looking at it," Smith said.

The REQ Center is expected to cost between \$55 million and \$80 million. The project could be eligible for up to \$8 million in state sales tax dollars over the next 25 years if Lewis County commissioners vote, as planned, to create a public facilities district.

Smith's land seemed like the sure site as REQ Center backers lobbied for their bill earlier this year. However, earlier this month, project manager Larry Hewitt announced the location was back up for grabs, mostly because of the potential problems in bringing water and sewer service to Smith's property.

Originally, REQ Center backers were hoping the city of Winlock could annex the land across the freeway and let the 7,000-seat domed arena and auxiliary businesses hook into the city system.

Winlock Mayor Cy Meyers, who was at the property Tuesday afternoon, said the city likely won't do that now, but he still supports the Exit 63 location.

"This is the most logical place for it because of the traffic you're talking about, the freeway traffic," Meyers said.

Logical, perhaps, but that doesn't mean the land will meet the necessary requirements for development. Smith would need to request a zone change from the county, which could become a lengthy process if it's challenged. To make an argument to get a change, Smith has to make a deal for more water rights on the Cowlitz River with neighbors.

REQ CENTER BACKERS have met with local Toledo property owners with positive feedback, according to Hewitt, but no deal has been struck.

Hewitt said the site is down to the three possibilities: Smith's property, the Southwest Washington Fairgrounds, or the land north of Yard Birds Mall on the Miracle Mile. Officials with Centralia and Chehalis have been lobbying for the REQ Center to come to the Twin Cities, but Hewitt said no land has been secured.

The owners of the Miracle Mile land, Bristol Homes, have been lukewarm to the project, but the fair association is willing to listen to a proposal, according to Lewis County Commissioner Ron Averill.

If the water and sewer issues can't be worked out before 2009 - the deadline to begin construction to qualify for public money - Smith said he won't give up. He said he's willing to forgo public dollars for the project because he thinks the investment is worth it.

"I know it's going to be a long journey, complicated, but I'm prepared to be here for the long haul," Smith said.

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