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Public Funding: A Tale of Two Stadiums

REACTIONS VARY: REQ Center Follows Sonics' Proposal at Hearing

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OLYMPIA - Same committee hearing, similar requests to build stadiums, two very different reactions.

That was the result of the circumstances that thrust the proposed Regional Equestrian Center outside Winlock and the Seattle SuperSonics' proposed new basketball arena in Renton together in back-to-back hearings before the Senate Ways and Means Committee Tuesday afternoon in the John Cherberg Building in Olympia.

"They're vastly different in how they're funded," said Sen. Marilyn Rasmussen, D-Eatonville and a member of the committee.

"The contrast is so great that it's recognized as a refreshing alternative to the Sonics bill," said Sen. Dan Swecker, R-Rochester and sponsor of the equestrian center bill.

The hearing room was packed with about 150 people to hear Oklahoma City businessman Clay Bennett, president of the group that owns the Sonics, announce Renton as the preferred site for a new Sonics arena to replace the Key Arena as the National Basketball Association team's home.

To fund that proposal, Bennett is requesting a continuation of King County lodging taxes and restaurant taxes for a public contribution of \$300 million for the new building. The total cost, he said, would be \$500 million.

"We're committed completely to keeping the team here," Bennett told the committee. "We need to make money so we can invest in the team."

House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, and Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, D-Spokane, have stated they don't see public funding of a new Sonics arena as a priority, and both have said they would have liked to have seen a proposal much sooner in the session.

After Bennett testified, Chris van Dyk, co-chairman of Citizens for More Important Things, the leading opponent of public financing of stadiums, told the committee he would launch an initiative to overturn the Sonics arena legislation.

Once the hearing on the Sonics bill ended, the four television cameras in the corner were hauled away and most people left, and the room was left with mostly equestrian center supporters.

Phil Smith, the Lewis County developer who owns the land at exit 63 off Interstate 5 where the Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center is scheduled to be built, said the project team is committed to making the center work.

"One could conclude that combined with the Great Wolf Lodge at the north (on old Highway 99), it would create a tourism bookend and change Lewis County's economy," Smith said.

Equestrian center backers are seeking the authority to create a public facilities district in Lewis County, which would allow them to seek two-thirds of the cost of the stadium from public bonds. The 7,000-seat stadium is expected to cost between \$55 million and \$80 million.

Sen. Pam Roach, R-Auburn, asked proponents if they were aware of a similar effort in Enumclaw, where King County had transferred its fairgrounds to the city with the idea of creating an equestrian center.

"When we consider this, and I don't have a problem moving this along, but I'm just saying there's another facility involved," Roach said.

REQ Center Project Manager Larry Hewitt said he is aware of the Enumclaw stadium, and said he sees little reason for concern about competition.

"That facility would be very compatible with the REQ Center," he said.

After the hearing, Hewitt said he was a little intimidated to follow Bennett's act, and said he doesn't know if being lumped together with the NBA franchise will help or harm the REQ Center politically.

"Clearly, our proposal is quite a bit simpler than theirs, to say the least," he said.

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