

Group seeks horse arena near Winlock

By Don Jenkins

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OLYMPIA --- A Lewis County group Wednesday asked lawmakers to help finance a 7,000-seat arena for horse shows, rodeos and concerts, and the project director announced the group has picked out land along Interstate 5 near Winlock for the venue.

"It's a coup of a lifetime getting this property," said Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt, director of the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center, which exists now only on paper.

The group hopes state lawmakers will form a partnership with private investors to finance the center, which Hewitt said would attract equestrians from all over the world, cost somewhere between \$55 million and \$80 million, and could be open by June 2009.

To begin their campaign for legislative support, project supporters, some sporting cowboy hats, told the House Economic Development Committee that the arena would create 30 to 50 jobs.

"We are desperately seeking new jobs and new opportunities to help our people," Lewis County Commissioner Ron Averill said.

After the committee meeting, Hewitt placed a map on a table in the hearing room and told reporters for the first time that he has a handshake agreement to buy land at the southeast corner of the Exit 63 interchange. The purchase price is "in the range of \$5 million," he said.

The land falls just outside Winlock, and Mayor Cy Meyers said the arena would attract hotels, restaurants and other retail businesses and change the town for the better.

"My vision for Winlock is to create jobs and opportunities for young people. That's why I became mayor," said Meyers, 82. "I'm not looking for work. I need to keep other people working, so I can collect my Social Security."

Besides the main arena, the center would have a 2,000-seat arena, exercise arenas and a "learning center" for events such as livestock auctions and clinics. The center would cover 40 to 50 acres, Hewitt said.

Private investors are being lined up, and it's possible all of the project could be financed privately, but a public contribution would help attract investors, he said. The center would be privately managed, but the public would own it, he said.

The center's main legislative backer, Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, proposes to use the same public-financing method that has built numerous other buildings, including the Cowlitz County Regional Conference Center.

Under House Bill 1164, sponsored by Alexander, about \$300,000 a year in sales taxes collected in Lewis County would go toward paying off the construction bonds. The money would be a loss to the state's general fund. Alexander said the state's contribution would total about \$8 million before the debt is paid.

"I'm encouraged by the support we've received not only from Lewis County but from all over the state," Alexander said. "I think we're in a unique position to see this project through, and I hope we do."

Although the project has been several years in the planning, it's become linked in Olympia with the closing in November of the TransAlta coal mine in Centralia. Doing something to help Lewis County recover from the overnight loss of 600 jobs has become the project's rallying cry.

"It really added a lot of impetus to this. I hate to say that, but it gave us a huge boost," Hewitt said.

Support for the equestrian center has not reached the highest levels of power, at least not yet.

Gov. Chris Gregoire has not endorsed the project. "The governor will work with legislators as details of this proposal come together," her press secretary, Lars Erickson, said Wednesday.

House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, said no one has outlined the plan to him.

Hewitt said the venue could host country singers, pro bull riders, dirt-bike racers and upper-crust horsemen competing in dressage. The main arena would have "luxury boxes," he said.

The smaller arena and learning center would host community events and meetings, he said.

Grand plans have been envisioned for the Winlock-area before. In 1993, a Scottish-themed development with a golf course, retirement community, artisan village and airstrip was proposed. In 2000, plans surfaced for a 250-acre theme park. Neither development happened.

Hewitt said people have asked why the equestrian center won't fall through, too.

"It fits the culture of Lewis County," he said. "It fits our lifestyle, and it's not such a big project that it's a scar on the landscape."