

Lewis County needs horse arena more Kitsap County needs NASCAR, House leader says

By Don Jenkins

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OLYMPIA --- House Speaker Frank Chopp on Wednesday said he wasn't interested in financing racetracks or basketball arenas for "rich athletes," but he wants to know more about a proposal to build a 7,000-seat horse arena in Lewis County, where a coal mine closed and threw hundreds out of work.

"That community is hurting financially, economically," Chopp said in a meeting with reporters. "We have an open mind about how to help them."

A group headed by Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt proposes to build an arena along Interstate 5 east of Winlock for horse shows, rodeos, concerts and other events.

Backers say the center would attract visitors from far and wide and pump money into the county's lagging economy. They estimate the center would cost \$55 million to \$80 million and are seeking \$300,000 from the state to help pay construction bonds and lure private investors.

The project is only one of several seeking taxpayer support.

Long-awaited legislation to finance a \$368 million NASCAR racetrack in Kitsap County near Bremerton was introduced Wednesday with 20 cosponsors, including three who represent Cowlitz County. Lawmakers anticipate the Seattle SuperSonics soon will ask for help to build a basketball arena in King County.

On a smaller scale, the city of Kent is seeking help building a \$35 million hockey arena. And the cities of Longview and Yakima are asking for money to renovate historic downtown theaters. All three cities made presentations to a House committee Wednesday.

Among the three biggest projects, only the horse arena received a favorable comment from Chopp, who said he planned to meet with an arena lobbyist soon to learn more details.

The equestrian center has been in the planning for several years but got a political boost in November when the TransAlta coal mine in Centralia suddenly closed.

"When you lay off (600) coal miners in a community, that's a problem for that community," Chopp said.

Chopp has consistently belittled proposals to help the Sonics replace KeyArena, which team officials describe as obsolete. He did much the same with a plan to help Florida-based International Speedway Corp. with \$188 million in public financing.

"They can go build their own racetrack right now if they get the local permits. What they're asking for is public tax dollars to help do that. That's where we draw the line," Chopp said.

House Bill 2062, introduced by Rep. Geoff Simpson, D-Covington, calls for forming a "public speedway authority," which would lease the track to private operators. The bill would divert sales taxes from the state general fund and authorize a ticket tax to finance construction.

Kalama's Ed Orcutt signed onto the bill as the lead Republican. He predicted a track would draw so many money-spending race fans from around the country that the up-front investment would eventually swell the public purse.

"I feel like it's going to generate money to not only pay off the bonds, but also increase revenue to the general fund," he said.

Other cosponsors include Reps. Dean Takko, D-Longview, and Richard Curtis, R-La Center.

Orcutt and Curtis attended a NASCAR race in Phoenix last year and both said they were impressed.

"You start to look over the parking lot and see the number of people at the event and see the money they're spending in the area, and it's incredible," Orcutt said. "When I got on the plane to come home, I couldn't tell you how many people had NASCAR jackets and hats and everything else."

Takko, who said he's never attended a NASCAR race, said he signed on as a cosponsor to encourage House leaders to give the proposal a good look.

"I felt if there were enough signatures, it would show an interest in having hearings," Takko said. "I'm not necessarily for or against it. I just want to hear the story. I don't think signing onto the bill commits me to supporting it."

Chopp said he has yet to hear from any of the bill's sponsors.

"None of those people have come to me and asked me to pass this bill. Meanwhile, I've got lots of people in our caucus who are adamantly opposed to it.

"If you're going to use public tax dollars, I'd rather have it go for school construction, for example," he said. "I said the same thing about the Sonics. ... The kids need the help, not a bunch of rich athletes."

At a meeting of the House Community and Economic Development and Trade Committee, Columbia Theatre board member Virginia Sewell asked lawmakers to support renovating the city-owned theater. "It's indeed a beautiful historic theater. But our crown jewel is getting a little tired," she said.

Longview officials are seeking state financing to cover about half the cost of a \$12.6 million fix-up and expansion.

Longview teamed up with Yakima to craft House Bill 1152, which would divert about \$1.1 million a year in sales taxes from the general fund to support renovations to downtown theaters in just those two cities.