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Money for horse arena approved

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Legislation to help finance the construction and operation of a Lewis County horse arena is on its way to Gov. Chris Gregoire for signing.

In back-to-back votes, the Senate and House approved a bill authorizing public-facility districts in four cities Friday evening. The REQ Center, also known as the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center, would be built at Winlock near Interstate 5, featuring a 7,000-seat arena for national rodeos and horse events.

Republican Rep. Gary Alexander of Thurston County said it is a chance to replace some of the jobs that were lost this year with the closing of the TransAlta coal mine at Centralia.

"I believe this will be a worthwhile investment," he said, urging passage of the measure.

House Bill 2388 lets four jurisdictions create public-facility districts that can claim a share of the state's sales tax, using it to issue revenue bonds to raise money for the projects. REQ Center backers say they will pay back three-quarters of the bonds using proceeds from the center's business.

A hockey arena in Kent and theater-restoration projects in Longview and Yakima also are covered in the bill, but a performing arts center was dropped Friday as part of a House-Senate compromise. The authorizing legislation had been written carefully at the direction of House Speaker Frank Chopp to prevent the attachment of a professional basketball or car-racing facility.

Six South Sound lawmakers voted for the measure: Republican Reps. Alexander and Richard DeBolt and Democratic Reps. Sam Hunt, Brendan Williams, Kathy Haigh and William Eickmeyer; voting against were Republicans Tom Campbell and Jim McCune, both of the 2nd district that overlaps Pierce and southeast Thurston counties.

The Senate vote was 42-4, and all four South Sound senators — Democrats Karen Fraser, Marilyn Rasmussen and Tim Sheldon and Republican Dan Swecker, who was a major proponent — voted in favor.

The REQ Center's director, Larry Hewitt, has said that if the project gets \$277,000 a year in taxes, he expects it to generate three times that in sales taxes for the state over the long term.

"It's a net gain in the long run, especially with a multiplier effect used for economic-development purposes," he said earlier in the session.

Hewitt also told lawmakers that the arena would feature luxury boxes and a Nordstrom-style service approach and would produce 150 to 300 jobs during construction. Thirty to 50 other full-time jobs would be produced at the arena itself.

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