

Senate works Columbia Theatre money into attractive bill

By Don Jenkins

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OLYMPIA ---- The Senate on Tuesday wrapped up proposals to build a horse arena near Winlock, expand the Columbia Theatre and fund three other projects into what senators hope will be one package the House can't resist.

"It puts things the Senate wants with the things the House wants," Longview city lobbyist Mark Brown observed. "I think it was a good smart tactical move on (the Senate's) part. I don't see any downside at all."

House and Senate budget leaders have indicated support for helping private investors with a \$60 million to \$80 million horse arena and the city of Kent with a \$35 million hockey arena. But the House has not followed the Senate's lead in getting behind restoring historic theaters in Longview and Yakima.

Senate budget committee chairwoman Margarita Prentice, D-Renton, added the theater projects to a House-passed bill that funds the horse and hockey arenas. The Senate also tacked on a fifth project, a performing arts center in Federal Way, at the request of Sen. Tracey Eide, D-Federal Way.

The fattened-up House Bill 2388 then passed the Senate 41-7 and now goes back to the House, where a theater-only bill has languished.

Prentice, Yakima-area Sen. Jim Clements and Longview's senator, Brian Hatfield, D-Raymond, sponsored the additions to the House bill.

"I think it's always good to have a backup plan," Hatfield said. "I think it says, 'Look, we're going to get this in statute one way or the other.' "

House members learned about the Senate's approach after the Senate vote.

Rep. Dean Takko, D-Longview, said tying the projects together should improve the Columbia Theatre's chances of winning acceptance in the House. "We get a bill with what everybody wants, so maybe this is the answer," he said.

Lewis County Rep. Gary Alexander, who championed the horse arena in the House, said he hoped the five-project bill won't send Gov. Chris Gregoire into sticker shock.

"I'm hoping the total weight of the bill won't get too heavy to where the governor says 'no' to the total package," he said. "I've always felt each project should stand on its own merit."

All five projects would be funded by sales taxes that otherwise would go to the state general fund for education, health programs and other government services.

Funding all of the projects would cost the state an estimated \$4.5 million over the next two years and millions of dollars in the years to come as the taxes pay off construction debt.

A legislative staff member last week told the House Finance Committee that the taxes for the two theater projects would total about \$30 million over 25 years.

"My only concern, of course, is it has to go back to the House for concurrence," said Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt, who's led the effort to secure public financing to buy and develop the land for a horse arena. "I'm pretty confident we'll get it through, but that's a bit of a concern."

With Prentice putting her influence behind the Columbia Theatre project, Hatfield said he'll be happy to join Prentice in making a late-session push to build a new basketball arena for the Seattle SuperSonics. "We're helping on the Sonics, and she's helping us with this," he said.

Prentice has been the Legislature's leading supporter of a \$300 million tax package to help the Sonics build a \$500 million arena in Renton. The plan depends, in part, on diverting sales taxes from the state general fund.