

Published August 07, 2007

Funds for horse center on track

Rolf Boone

Lewis County commissioners are expected next Monday to approve a plan to create a public financing tool that could help fund a portion of a proposed equestrian center.

Commissioners will vote to create a public facilities district that could issue bonds to raise funds for the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center, an idea that won backing in the state Legislature this year.

Proponents of the center envision a 45-acre site off Interstate-5 in Winlock that would have as its centerpiece a 7,000-seat domed arena for horse shows and rodeos, project director Larry Hewitt said.

Hewitt is a member of The REQ Center LLC, a group that supports development of the center.

Hewitt estimates that up to \$10 million could be raised by the sales of bonds through the PFD.

That money would then be used to purchase property for the center, while private money would be used to build it, he said.

The estimated cost to build the center is \$50 million to \$75 million, Hewitt said. During construction, it could create up to 200 jobs, and once opened, result in about 15 permanent jobs, he said.

Hewitt, however, said he views the center as a potential magnet for hotels and restaurants in the area, creating "hundreds" of jobs.

Hewitt, who rides horses competitively, has been interested in a new equestrian center for some time, but the idea finally gained traction with state lawmakers after the Canadian utility TransAlta Corp. in Lewis County closed its coal mine last year and cut 600 jobs from its payroll.

The result is that this year GOP lawmakers such as Rep. Gary Alexander of Thurston County and Sen. Dan Swecker of Rochester backed legislation that was signed by the governor to create a PFD in Lewis County and three other communities in the state.

Alexander acknowledged Tuesday that the equestrian center won't offset the loss of TransAlta's high-paying jobs.

"There are not many alternatives to bring back that equivalent labor market, but we're going to try our best," he said.

Alexander expects to attend Monday's county commissioner meeting. At the meeting, the commission is expected to vote to approve the PFD and then appoint a five-member PFD board, county commissioner Ron Averill said.

While the PFD is likely to be approved, the PFD isn't being created exclusively for the center, he said. Proponents of the center also will have to pitch their plans to the newly created board.

The PFD legislation also stipulates that the project must break ground before Jan. 1, 2009, Averill said.

Not everyone supports the center, he added.

"We do have some horse people in the county who feel threatened by it," Averill said.

The center has its supporters, too, such as Jessie Bensley of Olympia, who rides and shows two Arabian horses.

Today, Bensley has to either travel out of the area for horse shows, or perform in substandard facilities, she said. Thurston County high schools also could potentially use it for their equestrian programs, she said.

"We definitely could use a horse facility around here," Bensley said.