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Get in line, Sonics: Legislature getting plenty of arena requests

By Jim Brunner
Seattle Times staff reporter

Sonics owner Clay Bennett will find plenty of company when he heads to Olympia next month to ask the Legislature for help building a new basketball arena.

Across the state, sports promoters and cities are angling for taxpayer money to construct new arenas or patch up old ballparks.

A Florida racetrack developer wants \$166 million in state sales taxes for a NASCAR track in Kitsap County. Kent wants the state to pitch in at least \$10 million toward a \$50 million arena to lure the Seattle Thunderbirds hockey team. In Centralia, boosters hope taxpayers will cover two-thirds of an \$80 million rodeo arena. The state's five minor-league baseball parks want \$18 million in renovations, including \$1.3 million for a new grandstand roof at Tacoma's Cheney Stadium.

The wish list tops \$240 million — not including whatever the Sonics ask for.

"Wow. Form a line to the right," said House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler, D-Hoquiam.

Although lawmakers anticipate a budget surplus, Kessler said building new sports arenas isn't a top priority, especially for profitable businesses like the NBA and NASCAR.

"The public is getting worn out, especially by large franchises asking the taxpayers to pick up so much," Kessler said. "I think the proposals we'll look at more seriously are those where the team makes a more substantial investment and doesn't make the state taxpayers pony up all the money."

The wish list

\$179 million: For NASCAR track in Kitsap County

\$10 million: Toward a \$50 million hockey arena in Kent

Up to \$53 million: Toward an \$80

The smaller proposals may stand a better chance.

Gov. Christine Gregoire released a proposed construction budget last week that includes \$3 million for the proposed Kent arena and \$6 million for the minor-league parks.

The larger requests were not mentioned in the governor's budget and could prove more controversial, since they would require new legislation to extend or redirect taxes



A drawing of the proposed Lewis County rodeo arena, which would include 20 luxury boxes.



AMANDA SMITH / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The city of Kent wants to lure the Seattle Thunderbirds — shown in a game against the Everett Silvertips — away from KeyArena.

million rodeo arena in Centralia

\$18 million: For renovations to state's five minor-league ballparks

Unknown: What Sonics will seek for a new arena

legislation to extend or reduce taxes.

Sonics and NASCAR

The biggest proposals are expected to come from Sonics owners and NASCAR promoters, whose previous bids for state aid flopped.

The Sonics' proposal is the biggest mystery at the moment. Bennett is planning a large suburban arena suitable for professional basketball, concerts and major-league hockey. He has said that arena will require a significant public contribution, but has not released details.

A glut of new arenas could create problems for existing ones. A Seattle task-force report last year warned that KeyArena could become a financial drag on Seattle Center if it faces competition from a new state-subsidized Sonics arena in the suburbs. And Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels said he'll ask that Seattle be compensated by the state if that happens.

The other big-ticket proposal is for a new NASCAR racetrack in Kitsap County.

Despite finding little support for the idea last year, NASCAR promoters plan to return to Olympia next month with essentially the same proposal for a \$345 million, 80,000-seat track.

Track developers want to divert \$166 million in state sales tax to pay for construction, matched by \$166 million in private money. Another \$13 million would come from a ticket tax at the track, which would be owned by a public-development authority, much like Qwest and Safeco fields.

Grant Lynch, vice president of Florida-based racetrack developer International Speedway Corp., said he has met with more than 50 state legislators since the summer trying to convince them of the project's merits.

"If you take the time out of session to sit down with legislators and you can get a couple quality hours of their time, they begin to understand what sets this project apart," Lynch said.

Backers are selling the NASCAR track as a potentially huge tourism draw, capable of bringing hundreds of thousands of free-spending tourists to the state and boosting tax collections.

But those financial projections have been criticized by State Treasurer Mike Murphy as unrealistic.

Critics point out taxpayers would be left holding much of the construction bill if NASCAR failed to meet attendance expectations and generate the extra tax revenue claimed by promoters.

"It's you and I that will be paying it if the track does not make it," said Ray McGovern, an organizer of the Coalition for Healthy Economic Choices in Kitsap, a group opposing the NASCAR proposal.

Rodeo arena

In Lewis County, backers of a proposed indoor rodeo arena say it would help the Centralia area recover from the 550 jobs lost when the state's last coal mine closed last month.

Planning for the proposed Regional Equestrian Center, or "REQ Center," started before the mine closure, but backers hope the economic-recovery argument will prove compelling for state lawmakers.

The domed arena would cost between \$50 million and \$80 million, according to early estimates. Sketches

call for 7,500 permanent seats, a concrete floor with removable dirt for rodeo events, 20 ! luxury boxes and an attached exhibition hall. While designed largely for rodeos and livestock shows, the arena could also hold concerts, dirt-bike races and other events.

Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt, who is leading the REQ Center effort, said backers may be able to build the project with private money, but they're seeking possible taxpayer assistance as an option. "It's a relatively small amount of money, all things considered," Hewitt said.

Rep. Gary Alexander, the ranking Republican on the House budget committee, whose district includes Centralia, said he plans to introduce legislation that would allow Lewis County to create a public-facilities district to fund the arena.

Similar to the NASCAR proposal, that would allow some sales taxes to be diverted to the rodeo arena project instead of being deposited in the state general fund.

Hockey in Kent

In Kent, city officials are moving rapidly on a plan to build a 6,500-seat arena to lure the Seattle Thunderbirds hockey team from KeyArena.

Like the Sonics, the Thunderbirds want out of KeyArena, complaining it is inadequate. The team's lease expires in 2008, and Kent leaders hope their new arena can be completed by then. The arena would be constructed across from the Kent Commons, on what are now large school playfields.

City officials say they need at least \$10 million in state aid for the \$50 million project. Gregoire included \$3 million in her recent budget proposal. If Kent can get enough state aid, the city plans to sell bonds to pay for construction, to be paid back primarily from rent and concession agreements.

"I'm feeling very confident we've got a winner here," said Ben Wolters, Kent's economic development director.

The arena's anchor tenant would be the Thunderbirds, the junior-league hockey team with 40 home games a year. But it also could host ice shows, concerts and monster-truck rallies, Wolters said.

Minor-league baseball

By comparison, the requests from the state's five minor-league ballparks are small. The teams, which all play in publicly owned ballparks, got together last year to ask for a total of \$25 million. The Legislature agreed to give them \$7 million. The teams are lobbying to get the remaining \$18 million.

That would pay for a new grandstand roof at Tacoma's Cheney Stadium, a new concessions building and risers at Spokane's Avista Stadium, and locker-room upgrades and left-field seats for Everett Memorial Stadium. Dust Devils Stadium in the Tri-Cities would get a new scoreboard and Yakima County Stadium would get a grandstand roof to shield fans from the sun.

Randy Lewis, Tacoma's lobbyist, said one argument for the minor-league ballparks is their fan-friendly price tag.

A family of four can catch a Tacoma Rainiers game at Cheney Stadium for \$20. "That is still going to be the case," Lewis said.

Jim Brunner: 206-515-5628 or jbrunner@seattletimes.com

