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## Horse Cents


Gregoire Signs Public Facilities Bill

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OLYMPIA - Surrounded by cowboy hats and rodeo girls, Gov. Chris Gregoire signed a bill to create a public facilities district in support of the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center (REQ) Tuesday afternoon in the Capitol Building.

House Bill 2388 authorizes Lewis County to use about \$8 million in state sales-tax dollars to build the 7,000-seat REQ Center at exit 63 on Interstate 5 near Winlock. The REQ Center is expected to cost between \$50 million and \$80 million, with the rest of the money coming from private investors.

"I'm very excited. This is a very important development for Lewis County, for a community to get some faith back after the mine closure," said Rep. Gary Alexander, the Olympia Republican who sponsored the bill.

Gov. Chris Gregoire, seated, laughs before penning her name Monday afternoon at the Capitol Building to a bill that would create a public facilities district to build the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian (REQ) Center near Winlock. At the far right is Rep. Gary Alexander, sponsor of the bill.

THE BILL ALSO provides state sales tax dollars for community theaters in Longview and Yakima, and for a minor league hockey arena in Kent.

Alexander's bill to help the horse center enjoyed strong support even before the session began in January. Billed as a catalyst for economic development for Lewis County in the wake of the TransAlta mine closure that cost the region 600 jobs, the horse center bill flew through House and Senate committees with no opposition.

As the close of the session grew near, supporters began to worry that more controversial legislation to build a new Seattle SuperSonics professional basketball arena or a NASCAR track could be attached to the popular horse center bill and thwart its passage.

The bill title was amended once to prevent such big-ticket additions, but smaller projects - the two theaters in Longview and Yakima, and the Kent hockey arena - were attached. Another project, an arts center in Federal Way, was added, but was dropped at the 11th hour out of fears the bill was too loaded with pork.

Larry Hewitt, project manager for the REQ Center, said the turning point for the bill was gaining the support of powerful House Speaker Frank Chopp, a Seattle Democrat, who assured backers the bill would get a floor vote.

GREGOIRE, A DEMOCRAT and early supporter of the horse center, took a moment to pump her fist in celebration with members of the American Made Rodeo Drill Team, whose bright red and blue shirts and white cowboy hats became a

reliable presence at committee hearings. The five women lifted their cowboy hats in return.

Now that the horse center has the blessing of state government, the focus shifts to gaining approval from the county, which is the agency responsible for forming the public facilities district, Hewitt said. The REQ Center group has met with bonding attorneys to get a better grasp on the financial side, and Hewitt said he plans to ask Lewis County commissioners soon to meet to discuss forming the district before the Sept. 1 deadline.

The district would be run by a five-member volunteer board.

When Hewitt began lobbying the Legislature, he expected to see a small, simple bill pass. But as the bill caught so much attention and began to twist and turn, Hewitt said he was thankful for such an experienced team, led by Alexander and veteran lobbyist Vito Chiechi.

"The process is so much more complex than you can ever imagine," he said.

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