

Lewis County horse arena in line for cash

BY BRAD SHANNON/THE OLYMPIAN
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A Lewis County group wants to build a domed arena for horse and rodeo events near Centralia, relying on state tax dollars to pay for as much as two-thirds of the \$50 million to \$80 million project.

The project is one of more than \$600 million worth of sports and recreational proposals asking for state aid in 2007. The Sonics professional basketball team wants help with a new Renton or Bellevue arena; backers of a NASCAR race track in Kitsap County want financing help, as does a Kent hockey proposal; and minor league baseball teams want stadium improvement help.

In Lewis County, backers of the Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center have been working on their idea quietly for a year and a half, but they raised their profile recently to ask the Legislature for help. Led by businessman Larry Hewitt, they hope the loss of about 600 jobs at TransAlta's recently shuttered Centralia mine will focus politicians' attention on their community's need for jobs.

The goal: to create what Hewitt calls "a magnet" for activities by the state's various equestrian groups. The facility would host major rodeo and bull-riding events - perhaps even monster truck shows and music concerts - and the complex of 400 to 600 horse stalls and arena could be clustered with restaurants and a hotel, which could open in 2009.

"We know there is huge, huge support for rodeo and equestrian events in this area," Hewitt said. "We're seeking state help, but what we're really trying to do is put it together privately."

Hewitt said hotel groups have contacted him, and he envisions working cooperatively with the Great Wolf Lodge's indoor water park resort that broke ground recently at nearby Grand Mound. He also said the Frontier Rodeo Co. from Texas had agreed to participate in events.

Special legislation

"I'm hopeful we have a good chance," said Republican state Rep. Gary Alexander of Thurston County, whose 20th Legislative District takes in Lewis County, where the facility would be built. "It might be a chance to bring some jobs into Southwest Washington."

Alexander is drafting a bill that could allow a public facilities district, or PFD, to collect a share of state sales taxes to finance the project. A facilities district board also could, by law, enact an admissions tax and parking tax to help with funding. The project would need at least one-third local financing and could tap up to two-thirds of construction costs if Centralia or other local jurisdictions create a public facilities district.

Owners of the project are calling themselves The REQ Center LLC. They have eyes on six Lewis County sites near Centralia and Winlock, but Hewitt did not publicly identify them. Hewitt said his partners include Vito Chiechi, a longtime figure around the Legislature who recently worked for the Recreational Gaming Association, and Maria Chiechi.

50 to 100 jobs?

Hewitt said consultants have estimated that project construction could produce a peak of 150 to 300 jobs, plus the equivalent of an additional 50 to 100 full-time jobs "once you had events going through it."

Pay for managers might range from \$35,000 to \$80,000 a year, Hewitt said, but other jobs would pay less. The REQ Center would work with temp agencies, local colleges and part time people for event-based staffing.

Asked whether this meant minimum-wage jobs, Hewitt replied that he plans to provide well-trained "concierge" workers. "We're going to try to build a Nordstrom-level class of service around this facility," he said. "That is our No. 1 priority."

Some legislators are skeptical about all of the requests for money for sports venues.

"Each one has to be looked at on its own merits. But I think if you take all the requests, it's some \$600 million for sports," said House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler, D-Hoquiam. "There are so many priorities; we have to look at the merits of each one."

"I'm skeptical," said House Appropriations Committee chairwoman Helen Sommers, D-Seattle. "The governor spent almost everything we can spend. She hasn't left all that much for 'rainy day' and fund balance."

And Democratic Rep. Sam Hunt of Olympia said the ghost of Olympia's failed PFD project a couple of years ago could cast a shadow on the horse arena.

"I saw what happened up here and how it got muddled up. I'm cautious about it," Hunt said. "I told Vito I'd take a look at it. Given what's going on with the mine and everything down there, if this is something that would help the situation down there, I'd take a look at it."

Lessons of other PFD projects

Olympia failed to build a conference center using a facilities district law that Alexander promoted a few years ago; Lacey eventually was able to build athletic fields using the same tax base; Olympia's Hands On Children's Museum will also receive PFD money. In the past legislative session, Wenatchee secured an extension of the public facilities district law, letting it build an athletic facility.

The Wenatchee arena is for high school and regional tournaments and could be used by European athletes acclimating for the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia, according to descriptions that accompanied the legislation.

Hewitt is no newcomer to working with government. He has run an Internet firm in Lewis County and formerly directed marketing and ticket sales for the Tacoma Stars indoor soccer team. Hewitt said he and Vito Chiechi ran an election Web site, www.vote.wa.gov, from 1998 to 2004 for Secretaries of State Ralph Munro and Sam Reed.

Project highlights

Cost: \$50 million to \$80 million Location: near Centralia or Winlock, Lewis County Arena seating: 7,500 permanent, 2,500 temporary seats Parking: 4,500 spots

Features: 400 to 600 horse stalls, a domed arena with climate control, luxury boxes, a restaurant and lounge, and an exhibition hall

For details of The REQ Center project, go to www.thereq.com.