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The Chronicle Newspaper • Centralia, Wa.

Saturday, January 27, 2007

Equestrian Center at South County Site Seems Good Choice

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The prospective location of the proposed Southwest Washington Regional Equestrian Center in south Lewis County appears to have a number of advantages.

Siting the equestrian center along Interstate 5 at the southeast corner of the Exit 63 interchange, between Winlock and Toledo, revealed at a hearing on the proposal in Olympia Wednesday, would not be a haphazard location. It would not only have an appropriate rural setting that would be a good fit for equestrian-oriented folks countywide, it would also be about halfway between larger potential draws in the Vancouver-Portland and south Puget Sound metro areas.

The center would feature a 7,000-seat domed arena for such events as horse shows, rodeos, dirt-bike racers, country singer concerts and conventions. An adjacent smaller 2,000-seat area is also envisioned, which would enable simultaneous shows. The 40- to 50-acre center would also include exercise arenas, and a "learning center" for such clinics and other community events.

The proposed location, on which project manager Larry Hewitt, a Centralia businessman, said he has a handshake agreement for a purchase price "in the range of \$5 million," with its freeway location is not in the dingleberries. The extension of the city of Winlock, already under way from the west toward the opposite side of Exit 63, will bring residential, commercial, and industrial development.

And that is a major difference between the equestrian center and a couple of ill-fated development projects also proposed for the interchange area - a Scottish-themed retirement community proposed in 1993 and 250-acre theme park proposed in 2000.

Infrastructure improvements in the interchange area, including a truck climbing lane on the Winlock-Toledo highway, and others associated with the Winlock expansion development should on the whole help the equestrian center. The two developments would complement each other in further helping to attract motels, restaurants and other retail and service businesses to the area.

BILL HEARD: A measure (House Bill 1164) to help finance the equestrian center with public funds if needed got a hearing Wednesday in the House Community, Trade and Economic Development Committee, with a contingent on hand from Lewis County to help move it along.

One of the points stressed was that with the closure of the coal mine near Centralia and unemployment in the county having recently increased to about 8 percent, new jobs are a high priority for our area. "We are desperately seeking new jobs and new opportunities to help our people," new Lewis County Commissioner Ron Averill testified at the hearing.

The cost of the equestrian center is estimated at from \$55 million to \$80 million, depending on the design, with plans to

open it by June 2009. It's estimated it would provide from 150 to 300 jobs during construction and 30 to 50 full-time jobs to manage and operate it. More jobs would be supported in part by the people the center would bring to the area.

The measure, prime-sponsored by our 20th District state Rep. Gary Alexander of Olympia, would authorize creation of a public facilities district in Lewis County to help pay for the center. The money would be raised by diverting about \$300,000 a year in the state portion of sales taxes collected in Lewis County toward paying off construction bonds for the center. There would be no increase in the sales tax and none of the local option sales tax collected by local governments in the county would be affected. Existing taxes would simply be diverted from the state general fund to the project.

Project manager Hewitt is seeking sufficient private funding to cover the entire cost of the center. Passage of the public financing legislation would help with that by attracting investors, he said. If the private funding falls short, the public funding assistance option would be available.

Politicians in Olympia, including up to Gov. Christine Gregoire, have pledged to help struggling rural economies. They can do that by supporting Alexander's legislation.

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