

## **House OKs Winlock horse arena bill**

By Don Jenkins

Mar 14, 2007 - 11:19:05 pm PDT

OLYMPIA --- The House on Wednesday voted 80-16 to let Lewis County use sales taxes to help finance a 7,000-seat horse arena near Winlock. The proposal must still get Senate approval, but the House vote represented a major step for arena proponents.

"It's kind of fun to take a breath and celebrate our first real victory," said Centralia businessman Larry Hewitt, who's leading the effort by private investors to get public financing to buy land, and extend roads and utilities to property along Interstate 5 at Exit 63.

The arena proposal passed after some legislative fine-tuning by House Speaker Frank Chopp, Lewis County Republican Gary Alexander and King County Democrat Pat Sullivan.

Alexander wanted funding for the horse arena, and Sullivan was pushing a separate bill to build a minor-league hockey arena in Kent. Both proposed to use similar methods of financing.

The title of their bills were vague enough to allow either one to be amended later to become a vehicle to fund a NASCAR racetrack or new basketball arena for the Seattle SuperSonics.

To prevent that, Alexander and Sullivan's bills were combined in a new piece of legislation, House Bill 2388, that was introduced Wednesday and brought directly to the House floor.

The new bill's title, which can't be amended, authorized funding arenas with fewer than 10,000 seats, foreclosing the possibility the legislation could apply to the racetrack or basketball arena.

"The speaker (Chopp) wanted a real tight title that couldn't be expanded. It couldn't be amended for NASCAR or the Sonics or something else," Alexander said.

The combined and narrowly titled bill passed shortly before a deadline for legislation that originated in the House to be passed over to the Senate.

Lawmakers could have revived the proposal later, but Alexander said he was happy the horse arena made it through the House before the deadline. "I really think it was good for us to get out (before the deadline.) This project deserves that recognition," he said.

Alexander's stand-alone horse arena bill had been on the House calendar for several days. Hewitt said he sat in the House gallery until Friday evening and had been watching TVW since then waiting for a vote.

"We were really frustrated over the last several days," he said.

"Then 'boom, boom' it went that fast," Hewitt said. "Frank Chopp, Sullivan and Alexander, they did a crafty political move to break this free."

The legislation proposes to divert about \$300,000 in sales taxes collected in Lewis County to pay off the cost of buying land, building roads and extending utilities. Hewitt estimated that will cost \$10 million.

Hewitt estimated the total cost of the project, including the domed arena and another 2,000-seat arena, at

\$55 million to \$80 million. The arena could be used for rodeos, horse shows, concerts and other events, backers say.

The project has been several years in the planning, but it received a political boost late last year when a coal mine near Centralia closed, throwing 600 people out of work. Lewis County lawmakers have pitched the arena as a way the Legislature can help the county's economy rebound.

The city of Kent plans to build a \$35 million 6,500-seat ice arena. The major tenant would be the Seattle Thunderbirds of the Western Hockey League.