

Snohomish County wants to build a large indoor sports facility

By MICHAEL WHITNEY | Published October 30, 2019

SNOHOMISH COUNTY — A regional indoor sports complex that would double as a community center appears to be in central Snohomish County's future.

County tourism leaders say a sports facility like this will attract tournaments that bring hundreds of hotel guests to help fill rooms during the fall and winter off-season. It could be built in the next five years somewhere in central Snohomish County.

"It's really early in the process, but hoteliers back this, and cities seem to back this," county Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department director Tom Teigen said.

County tourism officials appear to have winnowed the potential site list down to three locations. All are sites already owned by city or county government. All have a dense pocket of hotels nearby, and are within a 20-minute drive to Paine Field, Teigen said. Indoor sports are a regional draw that's not being fulfilled in this area. A market gap. Leagues are booking events where they can, such as in Spokane and Wenatchee.

Tammy Dunn, the county's director for attracting sports tourism, is excited by the prospect. The facility would give the county a destination spot, she said.

A commissioned report from Hunden Strategic Partners suggests Snohomish County

build a 65,000 to 80,000-square-foot facility. It would have enough floor space to hold eight basketball courts, which is enough to attract regional and club tournaments. The floor space can convert to 16 volleyball courts, or room for wrestling leagues and cheer-leading meets.

Dunn said 40,000 square feet of floor space may fit up to 16 wrestling mats, which is enough to match a typical tournament's requirement.

"This facility is also for the community," Dunn said, as roller derby leagues, martial arts groups and others are hunting for indoor space. "It's the whole community — kids and adults." She emphasized the report is a "guideline" for the county.

The report's authors suggested eight places where a complex like this could fit: Two are spaces in Marysville, one is at the Evergreen State Fairgrounds in Monroe, another is part of the land for Everett's Phil Johnson Ballfields, and one plows under part of Walter E. Hall Golf Course and Kasch Park in Everett.

Teigen, the parks director, said that none of the three sites in mind would remove existing public amenities. One of the sites would repurpose existing land.

Teigen said on two of the site options, "90 percent of (county) hoteliers would love" these choices, and "60 percent" would love the third. He couldn't disclose the three sites.

The facility would need at least 15 acres total, including parking. The County Council would need to sign off on this idea.

Once things are teed up, though, Teigen said this facility could be opened within a year-and-a-half, and certainly within two years. There are reserve funds saved which could

cover the facility's design and engineering work. It would use a bond, calculated today at around \$31 million, to cover construction. The bond would be backed by hotel-stay taxes by tourists, not a new tax on the public.

We're not the only one

The market gap has other cities exploring their own regional sports facilities to fill the same need. The city of Lacey, near Olympia, commissioned a report for one. Spokane is actively constructing a 180,000-square-foot facility, the SportsPlex.

The city of Chehalis, 70 minutes south of Seattle, just built a 75,000-square-foot sports complex, but the Hunden report authors wrote the Chehalis arena's far-out location curbs its appeal to event organizers.

Teigen said other, competing sites being built in the state wouldn't hinder or compromise a Snohomish County facility.

"We feel even in the next three to four years, if one or two are added, we are confident" that a facility in the county will succeed, he said.

Paine Field plays a major role in the county's ambitions.

Teigen described how the airport's network of connecting flights up and down the West Coast is an asset, and even the direct flight to Denver from United Airlines. Denver has a nugget of minor-league teams affiliated with pro sports.

The county's proximity to the Canadian border is another asset, he said, because international competitions could want to use a Snohomish County arena.

Teigen said picking a location closer to King County could suffer from “compression,” a lodging industry term where hotels fill up because of market demands. The factor for south county is that Seattle’s visitor market is already thriving, and south county hotels are already reaping those benefits.

County leaders say they want the sports complex to complement, not cannabilize, other event centers such as Angel of the Winds Arena or the Lynnwood Convention Center.

Who’d pay for it?

The county already has the funding mechanism for constructing it figured out, and it won’t be from public pocketbooks.

It is asking cities for approval to increase the county lodging tax by \$1 at hotels with 50 rooms or more. So far, about three-fourths of the cities which officials need to ask have said yes.

An investment bond to build the facility would be backed by this added \$1 of new hotel-stay taxes. The county parks department might run the facility. Teigen said a lot of the needed staff already is in place. A bond would not be paid for from tax dollars from the public, Teigen emphasized in an interview.

Using the tax limits how big the facility can be without finding other funding for the bond. The county can’t aim for a bigger facility, such as with 12 to 14 basketball courts to grab national tournaments, because the lodging tax revenue won’t earn enough to satisfy repaying a long bond. Adding a dollar to the lodging tax fee would raise about \$1.2 million a year.

Using the hotel-stay tax to pay back bond debts appears relatively safeguarded in an

economic collapse. County parks department spokeswoman Shannon Hays said that during the Great Recession 10 years ago, lodging tax income only dropped 8 percent.



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