

Local projects left out

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OLYMPIA – Hundreds of thousands of dollars for Spokane figure skating? Nope. A million dollars to clean up the Spokane River? Millions more to fix up Avista Stadium? Uh-uh.

And as for that \$63 million for Washington State University to build a new lab in Pullman? No way.

A week after the state Senate proposed tens of millions of dollars for more than a dozen Spokane-area programs and projects, the House of Representatives on Tuesday rolled out its version. Surprise: About two-thirds of the local projects, under the House version, would get little or no money.

"We work hard at being frugal," Rep. Helen Sommers, D-Seattle, said of the House's \$478 million supplemental budget. It puts more money into health care and education, while still leaving nearly \$1 billion in reserves.

For local projects, the good news is that the House budget won't be the final word. Over the next couple of weeks, House and Senate negotiators will hash out a deal.

One big local project, however, faces a particularly tough struggle in the House. Desperate to build a new life sciences center despite last year's legislative denial, WSU wants to tap the interest of its own land revenues – mostly timber money – in order to pay for the \$63 million lab.

No way, House construction budget chairman Rep. Hans Dunshee said Tuesday.

For one thing, he said, the money should be used for maintenance, and WSU has a huge backlog of buildings needing work.

Secondly, Dunshee is intent on making the state's four-year colleges prepare their construction requests the same way community colleges do. Every two years, the smaller schools jointly prepare one prioritized wish list.

Until recently, however, it was every four-year school for itself. WSU, the University of Washington, Eastern Washington University and other schools would independently lobby for construction dollars.

"These guys have this old medieval way, where you use lobbyists and it's (like) crows at the garbage dump to get their buildings," Dunshee said. "We need to change that culture."

Tired of playing referee, he and other lawmakers last year required the four-year schools to come up with one joint list. Dunshee agrees that WSU's building is needed and will likely cost even more next year. But he said that to greenlight it now, halfway through the state's two-year budget cycle, would undercut the whole process.

"If you get rewarded for throwing elbows and hiring lobbyists, why bother having a system like that?" he said.

Larry Ganders, who acts as legislative liaison for WSU, said the maintenance backlog looks worse than it is, since it includes a lot of barns, sheds, pole buildings and other farm facilities that don't need the frequent work that a classroom building would.

He said that, yes, the university has hired former state Agriculture Department head Jim Jesernig's firm to lobby lawmakers on agricultural issues. But he said the new lab remains WSU's top construction priority, as it was last year.

"It was skipped over, and I guess it's been skipped over again now," he said. Ganders noted that the governor and the Senate budget both approve of the proposal. He said he's still hopeful of swaying House members.

"There's no reason for confidence," he said, "but we're going to continue to work on it."

Here's how other local proposals are faring:

- \$100,000 to market the 2007 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Spokane, plus another \$500,000 in the next budget if the city wins its bid for the 2009 World Championships: Senate yes, House no.
- \$2.8 million for repairs to Avista Stadium: Senate yes, House no.
- \$5 million for "minor works" maintenance at WSU: Senate no, House yes.
- \$1.25 million toward cleaning up the Spokane River: Senate yes, House no.
- \$5 million for military community infrastructure projects, such as development easements around airfields and moving a National Guard unit from the Spokane airport to Fairchild Air Force Base: In both budgets.

•\$1 million for WSU's Institute for Systems Medicine, a Spokane biomedical research program: In both budgets.

•\$465,000 for food bank refrigeration: Senate yes, House no.

•\$1.3 million for more staff at Eastern State Hospital's legal offender unit, which evaluates and treats mentally ill criminal defendants: In both budgets.

•\$400,000 for design work on renovations at Eastern Washington University: Senate no, House yes.

•\$10.9 million for mental health Regional Support Networks, including Spokane's: In both budgets.

•\$100,000 for Eastern Washington University's Northwest Autism Center: Senate yes, House no.

•\$100,000 for "continuum of care" money to help Spokane-area children learn: Senate yes, House no.

•\$100,000 for Spokane's International Trade Alliance: Senate yes, House no.

•\$800,000 for WSU's "AgNet" weather system: Senate yes, House no.

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