

## **FOLLOWING HOUSE BILL 239**

It can be a long road from a bill to a law.

Even before the legislature convened in Cheyenne in January, supporters of the Center in Hot Springs State Park had been warned – a bill to provide financial help might not get introduced even if all the “T”s were crossed and all the “I”s dotted.

If it did get assigned a number and did make it to committee, then it would be important for supporters to testify before the legislature. But by law the legislature need not give more than 24 hours’ notice as to when that testimony would be scheduled.

“That kind of timeframe is really difficult for those of us who see patients or clients daily,” said Dr. Guy Drake, president of the board of directors of Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation, which has spearheaded the project for the last three years. “You can’t just drop everything and leave. But we also knew it was critical that we show up.

“We’d been told that showing up would make a big difference. If there’s no one to explain or defend your position, then how do they know what you have done or why?”

Then there was the issue of the downturn in the economy. “When the Gov. got up in his state of the state speech and said that because of the cutbacks, he feared his friends in Thermopolis were going to be disappointed, there were a lot of us who felt our hopes sink somewhere down around our ankles,” Drake said.

“But we have spent a lot of time and money on this project, and we were not going to just walk away from it.”

It was the last week in January when the call came that the bill had been given a number – House Bill 239 – and that the now-named Wyoming Big Horn Basin Nature & Discovery Center bill was headed to the House Minerals, Business and Economic Development Committee. “We were having one of those Wyoming blowing blizzards,” Drake said. “The highway around Chugwater was actually closed to traffic. Representative Lorraine Quarberg called to tell us that the bill would be held until the roads opened. We made it to Cheyenne on the 29th, and the bill was introduced on Jan. 30th.”

House Bill 239 was sponsored by Reps. Lorraine Quarberg, Thermopolis; Debbie Hammons, Worland; Senators Hank Coe (Park County), Gerald Geis (So. Big Horn/Hot Springs/SE Park/Washakie) and Ray Peterson (Big Horn/East Park County).

“This was pretty remarkable in itself, that we had the Big Horn Basin working together,” Drake said. “Rep. Debbie Hammons even mentioned this in one of the committee meetings – that any spirit of small-town competition and rivalry had to be set aside so that we could work together for the common good.”

The committee met in a small room in the capitol building. “When they called us to testify, I think they were rather startled to see 12 people from the Big Horn Basin, plus three government officials and two legislators crowding in to speak in favor of the project.”

The people who attended the initial presentation were Bev Koerwitz, Thermopolis coordinator for Central Wyoming College; Dave Koerwitz and Jacque Michel, partners, Koerwitz, Michel, Wright & Assoc.; Kevin Skates, director, Hot Springs State Park; Sue Blakey, director of Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation; Mark Whitlock, Wildlife Creations, Worland; Eric Decker, coordinator, Big Horn Basin Resource, Conservation & Development Council, Worland; Jackie Manning and Frank Manning, Hot Springs County Commissioner; Beth Drake and Dr. Guy Drake, Drake Dental; and Toni Casciato, Hot Springs Co. Memorial Hospital and member of Thermopolis Town Council. Rep. Lorraine Quarberg introduced the bill, supported by Rep. Debbie Hammons. In addition, Milward Simpson, director of Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources; Sara Needles, administrator, cultural resources division, Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources; and Diane Shober, director of Wyoming Travel & Tourism spoke in support of the project.

“Many felt this would be a dry run – that we would get an idea of what we had to do and then we could try again next year,” said County Commissioner Frank Manning. “But a lot of work had been done prior to that hearing, and it obviously paid off.”

Rep. Quarberg noted that this was the only bill this legislative session that had the possibility of making money for the state.

“Perhaps people felt the timing was wrong, and they didn’t bring big projects to the table,” said Drake. “I don’t know if we were smart bringing the project to the legislature at this time or too dumb to know better.”

To the group’s surprise, the House Committee voted in favor of the bill 8 to 1, sending it to the House Appropriations Committee.

Part of the team returned for the House Appropriations Committee meeting on Feb. 3. During that meeting, one committee member asked why the group was coming to the state legislature instead of going to state agencies, such as the Department of Transportation, for funding.

“We are sitting in front of you now because those agencies kicked us up the ladder to you,” Sue Blakey testified.

The original bill asked for \$15 million, half the complete project. “We knew this would be difficult considering the economy, and we had outlined a fallback position,” Drake said. “As a last resort, we asked that \$100,000 be appropriated to fund the land survey and engineering work while we hunted for other sources of funding. And that was basically what the House Appropriations Committee accepted. They amended the bill to \$100,000, cleaned up some of the language, then passed it on to the Full House, where it had to be read three times. They made the funding contingent on setting up the joint powers board to administer the project and the lease agreement between the joint powers board and Hot Springs State Park – both of which were already in the works,” added Drake. The vote was 7 to 0.

“We were not surprised at the funding cut,” Drake said. “And it was heartening when a committee member told us as we were leaving that it was a good project and not to give up.”

When a bill is introduced on the floor, representatives can discuss or alter the bill, but no testimony or outside comment is allowed. “All we could do was wait,” said Drake.

“But one good thing about our state legislature is that you can listen to the proceedings over the internet. So those who could not make every trip listened to the proceedings in our offices with the sound turned up on our computers.”

On Feb. 10, HB 239 passed the third and final reading on the House floor -- 51 in favor, 7 against, 2 absent.

Rep. Quarberg explained that once the bill passes the House, it moves into the Senate and starts the process over again. “Now it gets tough,” she told the group.

Part of the problem is timing. The legislature had far more bills than time to hear them. One way of getting through everything is simply to ignore a bill that has been assigned to a committee. If a bill is not read (introduced) in committee, then it simply dies.

“Keeping the bill moving was up to our legislators at that point,” said Drake. “And I’m sure there was a lot of political bargaining behind the scenes. At one point, it looked like the bill would not get read in committee. And there were barely enough days left before adjournment to go through the committee process and the senate floor readings.”

Printed materials were sent out, and email campaigns began to support the legislator’s efforts.

The bill was read in the Senate Minerals, Business and Economic Development Committee on Feb. 25. Once again, a group was present to testify. The bill passed with minor language amendments 5 to 0.

The next day, Feb. 26, dragged on. “By the time the Senate Appropriations Committee considered our bill it was nearly 9 p.m.,” said Frank Manning. “We’d been waiting all day. The Senators were tired and so were we. I kept wondering how they managed to keep going that long. It was discouraging too when we heard the funding request ahead of us cut in half.”

“The Senate Appropriations began by addressing Milward Simpson, director of Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources. They wanted to know why state park officials had not made Hot Springs State Park its top priority when it had so many more visitors than any other park.

“Sirs, respectfully, not every good idea comes from government.” Simpson replied. His answer was repeated several times over the next few days.

“The issue of economic sustainability came up because of other instances unrelated to our project,” said Manning. The Senate Appropriations Committee amended the bill requesting that the group do some more planning and report back by year end. The bill passed the Senate Appropriations Committee 3 to 2.

“The government officials told us that legislators see the government employees all the time,” Manning said. “It’s far more unusual to have ordinary citizens there to speak – especially considering the distance and numbers of people that attended from the Basin. Milward Simpson estimated that we had traveled about 3,000 miles to speak in behalf of the project. I think all of us felt like it too.

“But that must have made an impression even on the Senate Appropriations Committee because as we were leaving, they thanked us for making so many trips and helping the Laramie economy,” Manning said.

The clock was ticking on the legislative session. The amended bill had to be sent to the floor of the Senate to be read three times. Then it had to go back to the House for a vote to concur with the Senate changes.

“If they chose to disagree, then nothing could be done,” said Manning. “There was no time left.”

On March 3, the bill passed the third reading on the Senate floor, 21 to 9.

The House concurred on March 4.

The legislative session closed down March 5.

“I think our representatives could probably hear all of us back here in Big Horn Basin shouting and jumping up and down,” said Drake.

“I think they passed it because they didn’t want to see us show up with even more people the next time around,” said Manning.

“I have to thank our legislators – Sen. Geis, Lorraine Quarberg, Debbie Hammons, and Sens. Ray Peterson and Hank Coe,” said Drake. “They all did an outstanding job. We know they were responsible for keeping the bill alive and moving.

“And even those legislators who grilled us hard, their concerns were valuable because they made us know where we need to strengthen our programs, our material and our presentations,” he said.

On March 13, Governor Dave Freudenthal signed into law House Bill 239 related to the Wyoming Big Horn Basin Nature & Discovery Center. The bill funds \$100,000 for planning, as well as engineering and survey work on the proposed site in Hot Springs State Park.

Among the participants at the signing was the five-year-old Kaitlynne Johansen, Casper, granddaughter of Toddi Darlington, Thermopolis, with Koerwitz, Michel, Wright & Associates. Darlington serves as secretary/treasurer of Hot Springs Greater Learning Foundation.

“I think it was appropriate for a child to be there,” Darlington said. “After all, that’s who we are doing this for – our children. They are the ones who will gain from our efforts.”

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