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Eloy closer to getting rock 'n' roll theme park

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PHOENIX — The effort to build a large-scale rock 'n' roll theme park in Eloy passed its first test Wednesday.

The Senate Commerce and Economic Development Committee signed off on backers' request to create a special taxing district to help finance the park.

The concept won bipartisan support even though some members worried the plan was nothing short of a handout.

"When you put someone at such a huge competitive advantage by being able to use municipal financing ... it's not even just corporate welfare — it's theme-park welfare," said Sen. Ken Chevront, D-Phoenix. "I don't believe the role of government is to finance for-profit corporations."

The bill passed on a 5-2 vote but still needs to pass both chambers of the Legislature and be signed by the governor. Holding some back initially were memories of Tucson's Rio Nuevo Downtown redevelopment project. In 2006, the Legislature approved extending Rio Nuevo's special taxing district by 12 years, an estimated \$800 million decision.

Citing little progress, Chevront said Rio Nuevo is "just a black hole," while Sen. Robert Blendu, R-Phoenix — who eventually voted for the theme-park legislation — called it "Rio Dinero."

But unlike Rio Nuevo, which diverts existing taxes from the state's general fund to pay off bonds, the Eloy project would have no fiscal impact because it creates a new tax — up to 9 percent — on activity within the park's boundaries only.

The money would be used to repay low-interest government bonds to pay back investors who front the money for the park. The bill requires planners to first raise \$100 million on their own.

The plan, announced in November, would take 300 acres of privately owned land in Eloy, just southeast of where Interstates 8 and 10 intersect, and transform them into a sprawling \$800 million theme park dedicated to America's rock 'n' roll history.

Its planners hope to complete the park by 2012 and say it could handle a yearly attendance of more than 6 million, or about as many visitors as Universal Studios in Orlando, Fla., receives, and 2 million more a year than San Diego's SeaWorld attracts.

The two dissenters on the committee — Chevront and Sen. Pamela Gorman, R-Anthem — argued if the park were viable it would not need government aid. Kevin DeMenna, lobbyist for the project, countered that's not how theme parks are built.

"A project like this, in a national environment, in an international environment, is going to be competing where there are going to be subsidies, where there are going to be checks written straight up by other governments," DeMenna said. "Projects like this will go someplace else."

Sen. Richard Miranda, D-Tolleson, cited the economic impact the Feb. 3 Super Bowl in Glendale had on the Phoenix-area economy. He said that would not have been possible if Maricopa County residents had not helped finance a \$500 million stadium there.

Blendu said if the project turned out to be unsuccessful, the Legislature could undo the law. But Gorman said while that's possible, it's unlikely.

Looking to build bipartisan support, the park's promoters sent out a press release Tuesday explaining that they intend to make the park "green," looking at solar-energy, biodiesel-usage, light-pollution and water-usage strategies.

Asked about the park and the taxing district Wednesday, Gov. Janet Napolitano would not comment, saying only, "We'll see if it gets to my desk."

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