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Activists concerned about the Vancouver bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics Worry the Games will miss opportunities to leave BC in a better position

Millions of dollars flow from Ottawa as Gordon Campbell's Liberals and their friends in business climb aboard the Olympics booster bandwagon. But the political road ahead is about to get bumpier. Just around the next bend, community activist groups are gathering determined to stamp their own visions on the Olympics bid.

The activists insist the massive investment tied to the Games be kind to nature, a boon to social housing and mass transit, and big job-provider to the unemployed who live right here.

The loose network of environmentalists and poverty rights advocates, while lacking the immediate clout of government or millionaires, does have a very real chance of affecting BC's chance of winning the Games. Ignore their concerns and they are liable to crank up the decibel level of dissent, a sure turn-off to an International Olympic Committee that makes community support a key criteria in selecting a host city.

"We're not opposed to the Olympics," stresses Am Johal, a community organizer who heads up the emerging Impacts of the Olympics on Community coalition, which will likely include the Tenants Rights Action Coalition, the Carnegie Action Project, the Society Promoting Environment and Conservation, and Better Environmentally Sound Transportation.

"Wouldn't it be great," says Johal, "to leverage the Olympics to actually move ahead with the four-pillar-approach to drug use rather than have a police crackdown so tourists won't see the open wounds of our city? Wouldn't it be great to be left with a legacy of a great public transit system? What if we could actually fast-track the Woodward's co-op?"

Johal expects to have a web site up in the next few weeks, followed by a formal launch of the coalition in January.

The Vancouver Olympic bid corporation will submit the first of its paperwork to Olympics officials in February of 2002 and, if still in the running a year later, must present a detailed "bid book" outlining every aspect of the region's plan for the Games. The winning entry will be announced in August of 2003. Should Vancouver win, an organizing committee will be assembled to implement the bid book's plans.

For a primer on how not to do the Olympics, Johal's coalition looks to Utah, where the Winter Olympics get under way in February. Everyone knows the headlines about bribes slipped to high-flying IOC members. A further scandal, to Johal and fellow activists, is how Utah squandered an opportunity to improve life for its own citizens most in need.

The sorry story begins with the very make-up of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games (SLOC). "Mostly male, white, wealthy people who saw the Olympics as a business opportunity" made up SLOC, according to Glenn Bailey, executive director of Urban Crossroads, a social service agency in Salt Lake City that serves the poor. Bailey and fellow advocates pushed to get low-income, disabled and minority group members on the bid committee, to no avail.

When Salt Lake landed the Games, members of non-profit SLOC were in position to direct millions of dollars worth of investment - and run roughshod over conflicts of interest. In one case, SLOC awarded one of its own members, a developer, a \$13.8 million contract and sweet land deal.

Some clear benefits from the Olympics build-up did flow to the wider community, including a light-rail line and, after much controversy, a temporary homeless shelter downtown.

But Bailey, who joined with other community advocates in pressuring for far more, now says, "There are promises, and there are Olympic promises - very grand promises that turn into nothing."

As the bid took shape, for example, SLOC promised to create Olympic housing convertible to 2,500 units of social housing. The real number ended up being 150 units. Up to 500 manufactured homes were to be used in alpine venues, then moved to native Indian reservations after the Games. Instead, the reservations will get 43. "What could have been a lasting legacy for working Utahans didn't happen," concludes Bailey. "The pie just kept getting smaller and smaller."

In one Salt Lake City apartment building charging low to middle rents, all the tenants are being evicted to make room for Secret Service agents during the Games.

That's a big concern for tenants' rights advocates in Vancouver, who remember that well over 1,000 people living in residential hotels were evicted as a result of Expo 86, 11 of whom died shortly after losing their homes. Calgary, too, saw tenants evicted from two entire apartment buildings when the city hosted the 1988 Winter Olympics. In one case, the landlord dressed as Santa handing out \$1,000 bills as a gesture of good will to tenants who, regardless, were forced to leave.

"What we've seen in other cities is that when the Olympics go through, all sorts of speculation causes rents to go up, and housing is closed down and renovated to make way for tenants who can pay higher rents," says Linda Mix of Vancouver's Tenants Rights Action Coalition.

Her group wants the provincial government to close legal loopholes that, 15 years after Expo, still allow landlords to evict tenants to upgrade buildings and charge higher rents. In making their case, Mix and her colleagues will face a premier with a history of opposing such measures.

Gordon Campbell was a Vancouver alderman allied with the Hotel Owners' Association during the Expo 86 run-up. Back then, when activists predicted rent hikes and evictions and demanded legal protection for low-income tenants, Campbell accused them of "trying to set up a bunch of straw men and burn them down. The hotels in the Downtown Eastside are not going to be prime locations for Expo."

There is no doubt that winning the Olympics can be a huge lever for major, long-term investment in a region's physical and social infrastructure, notes Vancouver-based urban planner Lance Berelowitz, who has made it his business to closely follow the Sidney Olympics process.

In Australia, some \$300 million Cdn was invested in the city of Sydney's capital works program over the three years leading up to the Olympic Games," says Berelowitz, recently returned from a visit to that country.

Sydney used the money to rebuild and redesign almost all downtown city streets, erect sleek new bus shelters and street lamps, spiff up parks, squares and other public spaces, plant trees, install

public art, erect or renovate a number of cultural centres and major recreation centres that will endure as legacies.

"The city did a great job of bringing the private sector in on this. They got leaner and smarter, and transformed downtown Sydney into one of the most vibrant urban centres in the world. It actually changed people's attitude there," Berelowitz says. "They see their city now as a jewel that they've buffed and turned into this beautiful thing."

Canada's federal government has pledged at least \$125 million to help stage a Whistler-Vancouver Games. Various interest groups are trying to graft onto the Olympics a number of mega projects, including a \$1-billion upgrade to the Sea-to-Sky Highway, an expansion of the Trade and Convention Centre, a rail link between downtown Vancouver and the airport, and a third bridge across Burrard Inlet linking the North Shore to the foot of Main Street.

Every option represents profound political choices, opportunities either seized or denied for one sector of society or another. But anyone who raises concerns as the Olympics bid gets rolling risks being branded a spoil-sport.

That's what happened to Bob Calladine of Whistler, who pressured his city council to conduct a referendum among local citizenry to see how many really support the Olympics coming to their village. He was rebuffed, and even friends, says Calladine, "look at me funny and say, 'So you're against the Olympics!'"

Calladine is quick to say he hasn't made up his mind, but he believes the bid process is neither transparent nor democratic enough. He worries that Whistler's community plan and growth cap of 54,000 beds, which was arrived at with citizen input and support, will be swept aside by whatever the bid committee commits to in its proposal to the IOC.

"I'm worried," says Calladine "that a \$5-billion industry is about to bang on little Whistler."

Jim Green was head of the Downtown Eastside Residents Association during its battles with the Expo brass, and now is an adjunct professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia. He has made a study of "hallmark" civic projects such as Expo and the Olympics, who they help and hurt, and how political conflict can be headed off before it boils over destructively.

He is a great admirer of how the city of Portland, in planning a new convention centre, prepared the ground by consulting widely with community groups and committing to something called the First Opportunity Target Area. "When you do something like a convention centre or Olympics facility that affects a low-income neighbourhood, you give the first opportunity for employment to people in that community and use the purchasing power of the event to build up small business and employment," says Green, who is an advisor to the Impacts of the Olympics on Community coalition.

At the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics bid corporation, media relations manager Sam Corea assures his group is going out of its way to hear community concerns, having already made some 300 presentations. The corporation's various working groups are looking at environmental and social impacts, says Corea, because the International Olympic Committee requires that such matters be addressed in the proposal. To that end, at least one environmentalist and one First Nations chief are helping craft the bid, Corea says. If the corporation is made up mostly of business people, "Don't forget, the Olympics is big business," he says.

Corea is optimistic the Games can bring a lasting, sustainable legacy to the region, benefiting people of all incomes and backgrounds. A soon-to-be-released study commissioned by the provincial government projects the Olympics will mean \$2.8 billion in economic activity over a 10- to 15-year period, generating some 67,000 jobs, according to Corea.

On October 31, Am Johal sent a letter to Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen, provincial cabinet minister George Abbott, and Member of Parliament Hedy Fry of Vancouver. Johal explained that he represented "an independent grassroots group that is extremely concerned about the potential negative impacts" of hosting the Olympic Games, but "also excited about the opportunities which could arise...and the benefits which could result for many members of the community, including jobs, housing and training for low income individuals.

"We know all too well," the letter continues, "what can happen when hallmark events are the product of poor process, poor planning and a lack of community involvement. From the debt-ridden Summer Games of Montreal, the evictions during Expo '86, or the failed 1996 Toronto Olympic bid, the lessons of failing to involve community members early in the process can result in incredible negative consequences."

Johal has yet to receive a response from any of the recipients.