

Games ignore locals, says prof

By Mike Howell-Staff writer

The Olympic Games should be spread over the country and take place in existing facilities to minimize adverse social and environmental effects, says a University of Toronto professor.

But Dr. Helen Lenskyj, a sports sociologist scheduled to speak about Vancouver's 2010 Olympic bid at a public forum May 30, said the process to win the Olympic Games—from the bid stage to choosing host cities—is weighted heavily in favour of big money and developers.

Lenskyj, author of two books on the shortcomings of what she calls "the Olympic industry," says big companies like IBM, Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonald's that stand to make large sums of money from the Olympic Games wouldn't want events spread out because it would affect their concentrated marketing strategies.

"In most jurisdictions that I've studied, the provincial or state government has completely refused to enact anything that would protect low-income tenants when the Olympics are coming because they don't want to alienate the developers and the landlords who think they'll make a killing," said Lenskyj

Lenskyj's visit to Vancouver is being paid for by the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation (SPEC) and the Impact of the Olympics on the Community watchdog group.

Lenskyj, originally from Australia, is the author of *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism* and will be releasing her latest book, *Best Olympics Ever? The Social Impacts of Sydney 2001*, in August.

In her books, she takes a critical look at how previous Olympic Games have resulted in evictions of low-income tenants from hotels, environmental damage through the construction of mega-projects and huge costs to the taxpayer—many of whom never reap any benefits.

Looking at Vancouver's 2010 Olympic bid, Lenskyj questions the proposal to spend millions of dollars upgrading the Sea-to-Sky Highway to Whistler when residents outside the Lower Mainland likely won't use it.

In Sydney, for example, Lenskyj said major Olympic projects, including the construction of a stadium, consumed city officials for at least five years while people around the state of New South Wales had "almost zero attention to their needs."

"And the taxpayer, whether they lived in Sydney or whether they lived in the rural regions, didn't have a strong voice in the priorities because the spending priorities were clearly dictated by the fact that the Olympics were coming," she said.

"The clock was ticking and they had to get the stadium built, they had to

get the airport upgraded and so on... and that's a very typical scenario."

To keep the decision makers in check, Lenskyj emphasizes the importance of watchdog groups in pressing city council and the 2010 Olympic Bid Corporation on housing and environment issues.

But even with such groups, she said getting detailed budget information from people behind the bid has been difficult.

In Toronto, for example, Lenskyj said watchdog groups were unable to use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain budget details-even though three levels of government had committed to funding the bid.

Despite her critical view of Olympic events, Lenskyj said she is not anti-sport. "I wouldn't have been a sports sociologist for over 20 years now if I didn't think sport was a great thing," she said. "But there are ways of organizing competitive sport that affirm human dignity and take the vulnerability of low-income people and human rights into account and take environments into account."

A recent city progress report on the Olympic bid predicts net economic gains to Vancouver of between \$5.7 billion and \$10 billion, depending on whether the Vancouver convention centre is expanded.

The report was accompanied by two press releases from the provincial government predicting the Olympics and an expanded convention centre would create an estimated 118,000 to 228,00 direct and indirect jobs in B.C.

Vancouver won't learn if it gets the Olympics until July 2003. The city's Olympic bid has to be in by Jan. 10, 2003.