

Olympic watchdog seeks assurances from bid backers



"There's no way I'm going to accept things without knowing what's going on," says Jim Green, spokesman for the Impact of the Olympics on the Community watchdog group. photo Randall Cosco

Mike Howell-Staff writer

A watchdog group plans to present Olympic bid organizers with 40 recommendations Wednesday aimed at protecting the environment, human rights and small businesses if the 2010 Winter Games are held in Vancouver.

The Impact of the Olympics on the Community will deliver its written recommendations-which are still being compiled-on the same morning bid organizers learn whether Vancouver is on a shortlist of cities vying to host the Games. Eight cities, including Bern, Switzerland and Jaca, Spain, are in the running. Local organizers say the Games could generate up to \$2.5 billion in tax revenues and create about 228,000 direct and indirect jobs in B.C.

Jim Green, a spokesman for the watchdog group, said those numbers are simply projections but noted the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation has already spent more than \$13 million of a \$29-million budget on the bidding process-about four times what the other cities are spending.

"Where is all this money going?" Green said.

"Why is it costing us so much more? We don't know and people want to know. People get upset when Rogers Cable did that negative billing for two bucks. We're talking the future of our province here. If we know what's going on, we may be supportive. But as long as people don't know, I don't see how they can be anything but extremely skeptical over the whole bid."

Michelle Penz, spokeswoman for the Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation, said the money is going towards everything from technical plans of sport venues to operational plans for transportation and sustainability studies with respect to the environment, people and businesses.

"There's no second place," said Penz, noting cities such as Jaca, Spain are spending less money but only began their bidding process last year. Vancouver, however, has been working on the bid since 1999.

Penz said the \$29-million expenditure is necessary, since the bid has to show the International Olympic Committee that plans for the Games will not disrupt or adversely affect people or the environment.

The Impact of the Olympics on the Community is composed of the Tenant Rights Action Coalition, the Simon Fraser University students' society, the South East False Creek Working Group and Better Environmentally Sound Transportation.

Green said the Bid Corporation has met with his group, but a meeting with the corporation's CEO Jack Poole was less productive.

"I've known Jack Poole for 25 years and it took us six months to get a meeting with him and then he kind of lectures us about our behaviour. It's so much easier for Jack Poole to say, 'Jim, either you're on side or you're not.' And I said, 'Jack, I've spent my life looking at both sides of the picture and there's no way on earth I'm just going to accept things without knowing what's going on. I'm incapable of doing that.'"

If Vancouver makes the shortlist, Green said his organization wants to be assured city hall doesn't plan to remove homeless people from the streets and evict tenants from hotels during the Games or even for the benefit of the Games' technical review committee when it visits next spring.

The organization is also concerned about the impact construction of a proposed Richmond-to-Vancouver subway and the widening of the Sea-to-Sky highway would have on the surrounding environment.

"When is the last time people were shaking their fists demanding that the Sea-to-Sky highway be improved?" he said. "I don't know anyone who's got that at the top of their agenda. They're much more interested in health care and other issues like that."

Green's organization also wants assurances that small businesses will not go under as a result of increased security in downtown corridors that prevent customers from accessing their local coffee shop.

The International Olympic Committee will decide in July 2003 on the host city for the 2010 Winter Games.