

MEDIA MONITORING - Radio - CKNW

Impacts on communities must be addressed if Olympics goes forward - Linda Mix and Kevin Shoesmith interviewed by Bill Good
CKNW
January 3, 2003, 11:30 AM

CKNW 11:30 AM Transcript - Impact of Olympics

Bill Good: Linda Mix is a community worker with the Tenant's Rights Coalition, and Kevin Shoesmith is chair of the Impact of the Olympics on the Community Coalition, which Linda Mix is clearly involved with too.

Linda, when we first met, you had major concerns about the Olympics, and you wanted the bid committee to speak to those. Has it?

Linda Mix: Well, Bill, it's been quite a year. Last January we were sitting in these studios talking to you about our group: who's in it, what it is we wanted to see happen with the bid. In the last year there's been some gains; there's been some disappointments, but I think we're on the right track.

The bid committee is listening. They have taken some of our recommendations and will be including them in the bid book. I think we're ahead of other cities, with that regard. They've made a commitment to work with the community, and we just hope that if we get the Games, they continue to do so.

Good: But I remember asking you if you were for or against the Olympic Games. I had rather presumed you were against the Games. It turned out you were not, but you had legitimate concerns.

Mix: Yeah. We've got to raise these public concerns around tenant's rights, housing rights with regards to Olympics. Whenever there's an Olympic Games, tenants take the first head in evictions and rent increases. Now, the bid has come out with commitment statements that include our concerns around protecting those tenant's rights.

However, the bid can't change the law. The ball's in the court of the provincial government now. We've got a new Residential Tenancy Act that's coming out, and we see things in the Act there that contradict the principles that the bid has endorsed, around rent increases and that. So there's work that has to be done yet.

Good: Kevin Shoesmith, what are the issues you are most concerned with?

Kevin Shoesmith: Well, there are a number of issues that we're concerned about, but in terms of the ones that are probably best dealt with immediately, there are three that we're most concerned about.

Housing is an issue, and Linda just touched on that: the preservation of low-rent housing and non-market housing for people that need it, obviously.

Another area that we're most concerned about is: civil liberties. We want to prevent, even before and during the Olympics, homeless sweeps. A famous example of that is: 1996 Atlantic Games where 9,000 homeless people were swept up and detained for the entire two-week duration of the Games. So that's unacceptable. We've got to make sure that kind of [inaudible].

Good: Has the committee spoken to that?

Shoemith: Yeah, they have spoken to it not directly, in that sense, but they have spoken to it in the sense that they want to preserve and maintain the current level of security there. We'll build on that, hopefully, and make sure that doesn't mean that secure means to round them up and put them into a secure [inaudible]. We've got to make sure that their rights and their dignity are preserved at every turn. So that's the second point.

The third one is: economic development. That's particularly in terms of offering jobs to underemployed members of the society: first nations groups, at-risk youth, marginalized people, people that don't have the chance to apply like they might otherwise.

Good: If they're employable?

Shoemith: If they're employable. But yes.... You see, there's the issue: in order to have somebody employable, be employable, you've got to give them something to strive for. To offer them the opportunity, as has been done in the past, with a great track record in this city, I think there's every chance that is something that can work out. And yes, the people are employable when there's something there.

Mix: If I could just jump in here very quickly, Bill. The bid, through the Vancouver Agreement, has struck what is called: the inner city working group. That working group is looking at civil liberties, housing, transportation - a little bit. But employment and training is one of the key elements of the inner city working group, so that people from the inner city - downtown south, east side and Mount Pleasant - are able to participate in the Games. That means: getting the neighbourhood healthy, making sure people are trainable and employable, and trying to secure local employment, local initiatives for low-income people.

Good: The Olympic village in southeast False Creek, a promise of non-market housing for the future - real?

Mix: It's real if we're able to get commitments from the federal government and the provincial government, to ensure that after the Games, those non-market units, that are sustainable, they maintain the funding to make sure that people stay in that housing. If those units.... If there's no funding from the federal and provincial government, those units could be sold off to market housing. That's why we're here: we want to make sure that doesn't happen.

Good: Yeah, but the bid committee has been clear about what it wants. So what you need is for the provincial and federal government to be able to make that happen.

Mix: Yeah. We need them both to step up to the plate with ongoing commitments and not just from 2010 but beyond.

Good: Back with the final segment, and we'll include your calls, questions.

We're talking with Kevin Shoesmith, chair of Impact of the Olympics on the Community Coalition, which, interestingly enough, is IOC Coalition, and Linda Mix, community worker with the Tenant's Rights Action Coalition and also involved with the IOC Coalition.

I get the sense from both of you that you would like to see the Olympics be used for what I think most of us who favour the Olympics would like to see. That's real economic development: housing opportunities, transportation opportunities. I mean, for or against the Olympics, there are some good things that could come from an Olympic bid done right.

Mix: I think, traditionally, that Olympics have been used to leverage certain things in undeveloped countries. This is a very developed country, but it's still the opportunity to leverage positive initiatives.

Why we're involved is for the opportunity to leverage tenant's rights, to make sure that people aren't ill affected by the Games. There's a number of opportunities all over the place.

Good: I mentioned non-market housing in False Creek, but there's a tremendous need in the Whistler-Blackcomb area for the kind of housing that could be created for the Olympics and used after the Games for those hundreds, if not thousands, of people who work at Whistler but can't afford to buy at Whistler -all the people who work in the hotels, the liftees (?), the people that work in restaurants and bars and whatnot. There's a desperate need for housing in Whistler.

Mix: Rents are among the highest in Whistler, and they've got a very low vacancy rate.

We heard of a scam a little while ago. A fellow had 70 beds in a house. He was going to rent those beds out to people at \$500 a month.

Good: He was renting them for about \$500 a month.

Mix: Yeah.

Good: They had nowhere else to go, so they were upset about him being closed down.

Mix: There's no options there. So one of the legacies, again, would be: employment housing in Whistler - for I'm not sure how many beds it would be, but it would be substantial - to house employees.

Good: And it's needed.

Mix: Absolutely.

Good: Am, good morning.

Am: Good morning. I'm involved with this group, in fact: the Olympics on the Community Coalition.

Good: Are you the only Am I know?

Am: Yes, that's right.

Good: Am Johal.

Am: My main concern, I think, is with the Olympic-related investments and the idea that we would build up infrastructure like speed-skating ovals and luge tracks, at the expense of projects like Woodward's, for example, that could go further ahead.

With the upcoming plebiscite, I think if governments wanted it to pass at 80 or 85 per cent, if projects like that could be found a way to move forward, where the province owns the building and the city has the property endowment fund of a billion dollars.... I think this is the kind of sort of balanced Olympics that people are asking for. I think if they moved on some of the big issues here, that most people in the city would, in fact, support the Games.

Good: Kevin, any thoughts?

Shoesmith: Yeah, absolutely. One of the things that I find most astounding about this is that even the money that has been earmarked just for the bid process, from beginning to end, amounts to \$34 million. I talked to Jim Green who was a great proponent of the Woodward's project who said that to get it up and running, including property and building costs, would have been \$27 million.

Now, if the bid process budget even out measures the amount of money that it would take to get that up and going and really be a centre for the community in that community's redevelopment, then, certainly, the much bigger financial picture of organizing the Olympics and building, then there's got to be room for that. There must be room for that.

That's certainly a thing that we can get back on the table. You can rest assured that we're going to bring that up into the provincial government's offices.

Good: But there will be people who fail to see the link.

Shoesmith: Fail to see the link between Woodward's and the Olympics?

Good: Yes.

Shoesmith: But Woodward's....

Good: Woodward's has been a hot potato, a political football, through two

governments now. The last government paid more than what Jim Green was talking about, just to purchase the property.

Shoemith: Understood. But I think that Woodward's stands as an icon that represents a whole larger issue, and that's something that Linda's group has been working on forever.

Mix: I think where the link is for a lot of people.... We had a meeting yesterday, and a prof from UBC met with us, and he said that he talked to his co-workers about coming to our meeting about the Olympics. The majority of them said they would support the Olympics if or but. It was all contingent on government cutbacks, different government spending priorities.

So I think if a poll was to be asked: "What you would you prefer, government spending on this, that or the other thing or the Olympics?", I'm sure that a majority of people would say we need government services back. We need to get that spending back to where it was.

Good: And the government would say they don't have the revenue to do that until they generate more economic....

Like, I was in Whistler over the weekend, and so I did some research. Whistler provides \$365 million a year in taxation revenue to the various levels of government. That's economic revenue that creates hospitals, schools, highways.

To have those things that people want you have to generate the income. So it's not about a schoolroom here or the Olympics. It's about a healthy economy to provide the schools and the hospitals that we all want.

Mix: Oh, for sure. We all understand that, and we're really looking forward to seeing the auditor general's report - so looking forward to that. Again, that's something that we asked for.

If the Olympics are going to be, you know, the economic stimulus that the province needs, that's great, but we need to ensure that in the meantime, everything's done right. It's a two-week sporting event that has far-reaching ramifications, both before and after the Games, and we need to do it right. The bid.... I think they're on the right track in terms of planning, but the other partners - the federal government, the city of Vancouver and the province - need to be part of that, as well. We need to make sure that these Games, if it happens, doesn't happen with a black eye.

Good: Total agreement. But everybody wants that, don't they? I mean, seriously?

Mix: Of course.

Shoemith: Yeah, but some people are more aware of these key issues, than others. I mean, people think about the grandeur that the Games bring. I mean, this is something that I've always watched on television and been a big fan of all my life. But then, when I realized that it was coming to my own backyard - I'm a Vancouver-born-and-raised individual - I began thinking

about bigger and further reaching dimensions.

Good: The two Olympics that I think of in terms of this one, because they're both Winter Games and reasonably close, both geographically and in time, is: Salt Lake City and Calgary. In both cases, virtually, every person I've talked to in those cities would do it again.

But did you look at those cities and say: what did they do right, what did they do wrong, what could we improve on?

Mix: We looked at, from the tenant's rights point of view, Calgary in terms of evictions, and tenants were evicted to make way for the Olympic sponsors that were coming into town: Ford Motor and Coca-Cola. Some were given incentives to move, but at the end of the day, they still lost their housing. In Salt Lake City, rents in the low-rent hotels, like our SROs, went up about 700 per cent.

This morning I was talking to a friend in Salt Lake City who ran a homeless shelter, who still does run a homeless shelter in Salt Lake, and he said that the rents have stayed high. The homeless shelter that was built for the Olympic Games was closed after the Games. The site for the homeless shelter will be used for an aquarium so they're housing fish rather than people, which is really unfortunate.

So I guess it all depends on who you talk to.

Good: Yeah. And it also speaks to the need to get some assurance before the Games are fully committed.

Mix: Yeah, we've been working for it.

Shoemith: And this is much the issue as anything, at this particular moment. The door has been opened, yes. If I'm any judge of character, I would say that I think they're sincere in listening to community's concerns, but now that the talks have begun in terms of addressing these issues, weight really needs to be put behind them at the three levels of government, that can make these things law.

Good: Linda, just before we go, your website.

Mix: Oh. www.olympicsforall.ca <<http://www.olympicsforall.ca>>.

Good: Easy to remember. I thank you both.