

ECONOMY, OPINION, TRANSPORTATION

## The inside story of No Boston Olympics

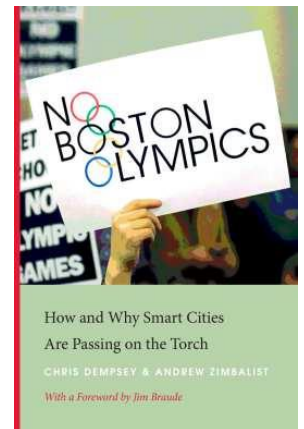
*How a small band of smart, young Bostonians upended powerbrokers' dreams of Olympic glory*

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*Two years ago Boston was in the midst of an epic showdown over whether to proceed with a bid to host the 2024 Summer Olympics. In January 2015, Boston was designated the US entry in the international sweepstakes, and the odds of the city landing the global spectacle seemed favorable, given that no US city had hosted the Summer Games since 1996. But just 200 days later, the proposal came crashing to earth and the bid was withdrawn. The end was due in no small part to the savvy work of a small band of 30-something-year-old Bostonians who came together under the banner of a group whose name telegraphed its mission: No Boston Olympics. One of the group's founders, transportation expert Chris Dempsey, has co-authored an account of the Olympic flame-out with Smith College economist Andrew Zimbalist, one of the foremost authorities on the economics of the Olympics. What follows is an excerpt from their new book, [No Boston Olympics: How and Why Smart Cities Are Passing on the Torch](#).*



### SETTING THE SCENE

Eric Reddy and Corey Dinopoulos, both Massachusetts natives and young professionals living in the Boston area, were the Leibniz and Newton of Boston 2024's Olympic dream. In the fall of 2012, each learned that the United States Olympic Committee would be seeking applicant cities to bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics and thought that the Athens of America, as locals sometimes call Boston, would make an ideal host. Reddy had many years of experience in sports marketing, and Dinopoulos was a visual design professional and Olympic aficionado. Many years earlier, Dinopoulos had undertaken a college project that contemplated how the mega-event might fit with Boston's global brand as a historic city that was now a hub of education and innovation. Introduced to each other because of their mutual interest in a potential Boston bid, Reddy and Dinopoulos met for the first time at the Omni Parker House, the celebrated hotel two blocks down Beacon Street from the State House.

## A FALSE START FOR BOSTON 2024

Reddy and Dinopoulos were unknown in Massachusetts politics, but they found some initial support for their notion from Eileen Donoghue, a state senator from the historic mill city of Lowell, twenty-five miles northwest of Boston. Donoghue cochaired the legislature’s Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development and believed the Olympics could be a boon to those interests. But Boston mayor Tom Menino—a towering figure in the city—gave the duo a cool reception. Menino, who by 2013 had held sway over the city of Boston for twenty years, was no stranger to Olympic bids. In 1992, the year before city council president Menino would assume the mayor’s office upon the resignation of mayor Ray Flynn, a group of Boston business leaders led by sports agent Stephen Freyer had pitched an Olympic bid to city hall. Mayor Flynn, a former All-American basketball player at Providence College, was supportive of the effort. He had once posed holding the Olympic torch in front of the famous Paul Revere statue in Boston’s North End. But in 1993, Flynn was appointed by President Clinton to be ambassador to the Vatican and he soon gave way to Menino. At first, the new mayor supported the bid, telling the *Boston Globe*, “I will work with the Olympics Committee. I will promote it. This is good for Boston, good for its people.” After further examination, Menino turned away from the Olympic bid, concluding that his priorities should be the day-to-day needs of the city’s residents, rather than the demands of a three-week sporting event. He ultimately supported the construction of a new convention center in the city, but not the accompanying baseball and football stadiums that many saw as precursors to playing Olympic host. “Stadiums do not revive cities,” he said in a later State of the City speech. “People do.”



*Residents hold signs at the first public meeting on the Boston 2024 proposal in February 2015.*

Twenty years after that initial Olympic pitch, Mayor Menino seemed as convinced as ever that Boston would be better off passing on a bid. On February 19, 2013, when the USOC sent his office—and that of thirty-four other mayors around the country—a letter soliciting bids for the 2024 Summer Games, Menino dismissed it. Perhaps a diligent staffer in Menino’s office read the insightful piece by longtime Olympic observer and writer Alan Abrahamson (somewhat perplexingly reposted on the USOC’s website) explaining the subtext of the

USOC’s letter: “If you, Mr. or Ms. Mayor, would like to play in the Olympic space, be crystal clear going in you will do so as the junior partner.” That is, in any American bidding process, the USOC calls the shots and the host city is just along for the ride. More likely, Abrahamson’s piece went unnoticed, because for Menino and his seasoned staff, the letter needed no translation. The mayor was famous for adopting a direct, hands-on approach to proposals that might alter his beloved city. In one instance that became lore in Boston’s real estate community, the mayor had personally chosen the architectural design of the crown of a new building that was to grace the city’s skyline from a set of options presented by an obsequious developer eager for a green light from city hall. To Menino, playing “junior partner” held little appeal if outsiders from the USOC were going to take a lead role in organizing a three-week sporting event that would bring generational, monumental, and disruptive changes to Boston.

On March 5, 2013, Menino panned a Boston Olympic bid as “far-fetched” in a radio interview with public radio station WBUR, saying, “I need every penny I have to make sure we continue the services to the people of Boston.” A Boston *Herald* article published the next day, titled “Hub Olympics Idea Torched,” quoted Menino’s close friend and ally, John Fish, the chairman and CEO of Suffolk Construction. “We’re coming out of the greatest economic recession and I don’t think our resources should be diluted by going after something so far out,” said Fish, the city’s most successful builder. “If someone wanted to pour \$1 billion into our health care or education system or the life sciences industry, I’d be all for that discussion.” Fish had supported Stephen Freyer’s bid in the early 1990s but now told *Herald* reporters Dave Wedge

and Erin Smith: “Our perspective has changed.” Led by the earnest but insignificant duo of Reddy and Dinopoulos and lacking the support of the incumbent mayor and power players like Fish, a Boston 2024 bid was, for all intents and purposes, stillborn.



Residents rally before a community meeting in Jamaica Plain in June 2015.

## BOSTON 2024 GETS OFF THE STARTING BLOCKS

Just three weeks after the *Herald* report had seemingly ended the city’s Olympic prospects, the political landscape in Boston experienced a tectonic shift: Mayor Menino announced that he would not be seeking reelection. The pronouncement created a once-in-a-generation political vacuum and touched off a feverish race to replace the only mayor that many Bostonians

had ever known. More than a dozen candidates, including the eventual finalists—a state representative and union organizer from Dorchester named Marty Walsh, and city councilor John Connolly—would vie to be Boston’s first new mayor since 1993.

The political vacuum also created new life for the idea of a Boston Olympics. Its new champion was someone who just a few weeks prior to Menino’s decision had panned the bid to the *Herald*. John Fish’s perspective had changed again. Fish grabbed the reins from Reddy and Dinopoulos and began to meet quietly with other civic leaders about the idea of bringing the Olympics to Boston in 2024. He persuaded a still-reluctant but now lame-duck Menino to allow him to respond to the USOC’s forlorn February solicitation letter. He invited USOC officials to town in October 2013 for a private meeting at the Mandarin Oriental, perhaps Boston’s most luxurious building, where Fish owned a \$7 million condominium. Among those in attendance were Dinopoulos and Mayor Menino, who by then had just a few months remaining in office and was no doubt curious about the bid’s prospects. In that meeting, USOC officials told Fish that a host city’s priority should be to determine its long-term plans for development, and to submit a bid only if hosting the Olympics fit into those plans. (This spin—“we really care about the city’s development”—is the standard rhetoric. Note that the USOC eventually turned to Los Angeles, whose bid has little to do with city building.) The idea captivated Fish, a prolific builder who recognized a unique opportunity to remake parts of the city over the following decade. As he put it to *Boston* magazine, “I start with the question: What is the city of Boston going to look like in 30 to 40 years? It involves thinking big—not just thinking about where we’ve been and where we’re going, but thinking a little abnormally. We may never realize the Olympics in 2024, but the opportunity to bring the community together to talk about the future is a powerful thing.”

Fish was perhaps the only person in Massachusetts positioned to attempt something as ambitious as an Olympic bid. He had been named the most powerful Bostonian by *Boston* magazine in 2012—even ahead of the governor and the mayor—and with his deep connections in the city’s political, business, and philanthropic spheres, had an unmatched reputation as the person to go to when one wanted to get things done in Boston. Among other civic and institutional roles, Fish was the incoming chairman of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce; the deputy chairman (and future chairman) of the Federal Reserve’s Boston branch; the founder of the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership, which advocated for business interests at the State House; and the incoming chairman of the board of trustees at Boston

College, one of the city's most influential universities. Fish had created an unrivaled platform for influencing the direction of the region in the coming decades. His competitive intensity was the stuff of legend in Massachusetts business circles. Fish was known for arriving at work at 4:30 a.m. He had ruthlessly outcompeted rival construction firms, including one owned by his own brother, to become the dominant builder in New England. Bringing the Olympics to Boston would be a crowning achievement, cementing Fish's position as his generation's ultimate Boston power broker.

Fish also must have understood that leading a successful Olympic bid would bring him benefits far beyond Massachusetts's borders. A successful bid offered unprecedented international exposure for its leaders. Peter Ueberroth, the president and CEO of Los Angeles's 1984 bid, had used the Games to catapult himself from a successful but nationally unknown regional businessperson to become *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1984, and later commissioner of Major League Baseball. Billy Payne, who spearheaded Atlanta's 1996 bid, would later become chairman of Augusta National Golf Club, home of the Masters tournament. The bidding process alone would provide Fish the chance to use his private jet to travel the world to rub shoulders with royalty, former Olympic athletes, and the ultrawealthy who made up the International Olympic Committee. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for a businessperson and philanthropist who had spent two decades gradually amassing power in Massachusetts's capital city. John Fish was hooked.

Fish began to put his immense political capital to work building the foundation of an Olympic bid. He and his allies helped orchestrate the passage of a legislative resolution, first filed in January 2013 by Senator Donoghue, establishing a commission to investigate the "feasibility of hosting the summer Olympics [in Massachusetts] in 2024." Governor Deval Patrick signed the resolution on October 31, 2013—a Halloween treat for Olympic boosters. Despite its significance, the resolution received only minimal coverage from the media, as the news cycle focused on the Red Sox World Series win on October 30 and the final dramatic days of Boston's mayoral election. The stated purpose of the commission, for which no funding was appropriated, was to review "all aspects of a prospective summer Olympics in the Commonwealth" with a focus on requirements and impacts in the areas of (1) infrastructure, (2) transportation, (3) tourism, (4) lodging, (5) location for events (venues), (6) costs, and (7) benefits.

Massachusetts's wealth of universities and think tanks meant that State House leaders could choose from a long list of professors and academics with the experience and expertise to weigh the costs and benefits of a potential bid, as was called for in the resolution. In fact, Massachusetts was home to noted economists whose research focused specifically on the impacts of sporting mega-events. One of these economists, Professor Victor Matheson of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, proactively reached out to the commission and volunteered to serve. Another, Andrew Zimbalist at Smith College in Northampton, was contacted by his state senator, Stan Rosenberg (a powerful figure who was in line to become the next senate president). After receiving Zimbalist's blessing, Rosenberg submitted the professor's name to Governor Patrick for consideration. Either Matheson or Zimbalist would have been a logical choice for inclusion if the governor were looking for a balanced and serious assessment. Zimbalist had written a bookshelf's worth of books and studies on the economics of sports and had examined the International Olympic Committee's business model closely. Matheson had authored a score of peer-reviewed academic articles on sporting mega-events and had conducted econometric studies assessing the true economic impact of hosting an Olympic event. Another logical choice would have been Judith Grant Long, an urban planning professor at Harvard University, who was a leading scholar on sports facilities and economic development and was working on a manuscript on the Olympics and urban design. Zimbalist recommended her to Senator Rosenberg. Despite their expertise and eagerness to serve on the commission, not one of the three scholars was asked to serve.

Instead, the appointees to the commission were a cast of characters whose qualifications had more to do with their political connections and ties to the tourism and construction industries than their economic knowhow. Among them were State House political staffers and the CEO of Boston's Duck Boats, made famous for parading the city's professional athletes down Boylston Street after championship victories (the Red Sox championship parade that year was Saturday, November 2). Appointees also included the sports agent Stephen Freyer (the bid leader who had won Mayor Flynn's support in 1992), Dan O'Connell (a former secretary of economic development for Governor Patrick who later had been hired by John

Fish to run the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership), state senator Donoghue (who had supported the 2024 bid from its early days), and John Fish himself, who became the commission's chairman. Thus, while the commission's stated goal was to study the feasibility of a bid, it also served another purpose: demonstrating to the USOC that Fish and his allies could successfully pull the levers of power in state and local government—a necessary precondition to advancing an Olympic bid.

Boston voters went to the polls on November 5, 2013, and handed Marty Walsh a slim electoral victory. By then, Fish and his allies in the political and business communities were artfully executing the early stages of the traditional Olympic booster playbook: leaking to the media venue possibilities that conjured images of world-class athletes competing in locations familiar and famed (such as Fenway Park and Harvard Stadium), promising that with careful planning Boston's Games would avoid the issues of cost overruns and white elephants that had plagued prior host cities, and pitching the bid as a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to think big about the city's future and to upgrade its infrastructure. Among those Fish had recruited to the effort were Mitt Romney, former Massachusetts governor and organizer of Salt Lake City's 2002 Winter Games, who spoke hopefully about the idea on a visit to NBC's Meet the Press; Ed Davis, the former Boston police commissioner, who had gained acclaim for his response to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings; and Robert Kraft, the dapper owner of the New England Patriots. In a front-page *Boston Globe* story, perfectly timed to appear in the slow news cycle that followed the captivating and exhausting city election, Romney, Davis, and Kraft all praised the idea of a bid, while Fish outlined his approach to the civic effort that might ultimately bring the Games to Boston: "It has to be done thoughtfully. It has to be based on analytics. It has to be slow and deliberate. It has to be done with consensus. And we need to sit at the table and have this discussion constructively—or we'll never know."

## ROOTS OF THE OPPOSITION

Marty Walsh's victory over John Connolly by fewer than five thousand votes was a disappointing loss for thirty-something Massachusetts natives Liam Kerr and Chris Dempsey. Kerr, who lived in a small first-floor condominium on the "Back of the Hill" in the shadow of the State House, had run an education-focused political action committee that had spent more than \$1.3 million in support of Connolly's election. Dempsey, a management consultant at Bain & Co., had been a member of Connolly's finance committee, organizing "Young Professionals" fundraisers and canvassing efforts for a candidate he had supported since they were first introduced in 2008.

They were in Kerr's living room commiserating over the loss just days after the election when the two first discussed the prospect of a Boston Olympic bid. Although they both recently had earned MBAs, Kerr and Dempsey had public policy backgrounds and a lifelong interest in Massachusetts's civic affairs. They were eager to stay involved, notwithstanding the loss of their favored mayoral candidate. Articles like the one in the *Globe* that quoted powerful boosters Fish, Romney, Davis, and Kraft alarmed the duo. A Boston 2024 bid seemed to be barreling ahead without opposition and without sober reflection, despite some glaring drawbacks and a troubling history of poor outcomes in prior host cities. While the boosters were talking about a "frugal" bid, early inklings of their plans were anything but frugal. As *Boston Globe* Olympics reporter John Powers pointed out in November 2013: "Except for TD Garden, the city would have to build all of the big-ticket venues from scratch: the main stadium (Gillette [Stadium] lacks the required track), an aquatics complex with a 10-meter diving platform, a velodrome, and an Olympic village (no, college dorms don't qualify)." The boosters were also highlighting the idea that the bid could be an exercise in planning for Boston's future. Kerr and Dempsey both aspired to careers that might help shape the region's future, but they didn't see the wisdom in letting those civic plans be driven by the needs of a three-week event. That unfortunate result seemed inevitable if the IOC awarded Boston the Games at the conclusion of the bid process in 2017.

Dempsey grew up in Brookline Village, the son of two public school educators who had met in the late 1970s while teaching at the Martin Luther King, Jr. School, in Boston's gritty Grove Hall neighborhood. His father, a social studies teacher, had often shared the story of Boston's Stop the Highways movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In that proud and prescient moment in Boston's history, neighborhood groups had joined together to oppose a proposal for an "Inner Belt" circumferential highway and arterial "Southwest Corridor" highway that would have cut through neighborhoods in Roxbury, Fenway, Cambridge, and Somerville, among others. The construction of these highways had been supported by

major business leaders, contractors, and labor unions, and had the strong backing of the Republican governor, Frank Sargent, a former Department of Public Works commissioner. But years of committed activism and opposition by neighborhood and grassroots groups had turned the tide—culminating in an address by Governor Sargent on live television in February 1970 in which he said, “Nearly everyone was sure that highways were the only answer to transportation problems for years to come. But we were wrong.” To Dempsey, the Stop the Highways movement provided hope that a “No” campaign could succeed against powerful interests—at least that had been true in 1970. More important, it was also evidence that saying “No” could have an immensely positive legacy for the region he loved. By 2013, more than forty years after its victory, the Stop the Highways movement was still seen as a dramatic step forward for smarter, better, more sustainable planning and growth. The highway naysayers hadn’t stopped the city’s progress—they’d defended their city from a damaging plan, and turned it toward a brighter, more prosperous future.

Like Dempsey, Kerr had grown up in the suburbs of Boston in a middle-class family. Kerr was a political junkie with an entrepreneurial mind. While he appreciated and understood the role that personal relationships played in politics, he despaired over the fact that these relationships were often the primary driver of policy outcomes in Massachusetts. Kerr and Dempsey had read the independent economic analysis that consistently found that “winning” an Olympic bid was typically a losing proposition for the host community. But Massachusetts’s political leaders seemed to be letting a few powerful and well-connected individuals lead the state down this potentially harmful path.

Kerr contacted his friend and associate Conor Yunits, another Massachusetts native in his early thirties. Yunits had helped advise Kerr’s political committee from his post at the public affairs consulting firm Liberty Square Group, where Yunits was a vice president. Like Kerr, Yunits was a political junkie—he had run unsuccessfully for state representative in his native Brockton, where his father had once served as mayor. Yunits had been following the potential bid’s developments closely and shared Kerr and Dempsey’s concerns with the strong momentum behind it.

Many Bostonians dismissed Boston 2024 as a lark. The conventional wisdom was that the USOC and IOC would never pick Boston over larger, wealthier, higher-profile cities like Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Paris, or Rome. At a Chamber of Commerce event in June 2014, US Senator Ed Markey joked that a Boston Olympics should include condo flipping and synchronized double parking as official sports. Even with powerful boosters behind it, the bid seemed like a long shot and made for a reliable punch line.

But Dempsey, Kerr, and Yunits knew that Boston had some natural advantages. Chief among them was Boston’s position on the East Coast, the most valuable time zone in the world for live television events. And Boston’s rivers, harbor, parks, monuments, historic neighborhoods, and stately downtown provided an appealing backdrop for television. Boston was also home to two brands whose value even Olympic sponsors such as Coca-Cola and Toyota would envy: Harvard and MIT. The IOC would salivate at the chance to associate itself with these prestigious universities. Finally, Boston’s political and business communities were just large enough to rally the resources needed to support an Olympic bid, and just cozy enough that they might be able to squelch any substantive dissent. The USOC and IOC wanted cities to present a united front. These factors made Boston 2024 a credible bid to advance at the USOC level over bids from places like Los Angeles (been there, done that), Washington, D.C. (too political), or Dallas (too Texas).

Olympic prognosticators had reason to believe that whichever bid emerged from the USOC’s process would be the favorite to win when the IOC voted in 2017. The IOC’s single-largest source of revenue was its contract with NBC television for the rights to air the Games in the United States. Yet the Olympic Committee’s premier event, the Summer Olympics, hadn’t been hosted in the United States since Atlanta in 1996. Surely NBC was eager to have the Games back on US soil and had communicated that desire to the IOC in its negotiations to extend its ownership of those television rights. That deal, completed in May 2014, will pay the IOC \$7.75 billion between 2021 and 2032. Further strengthening a US bid’s chances was a May 2012 settlement of a long-standing disagreement between the USOC and IOC about how Olympic media and sponsorship funds would be distributed. Now the USOC and IOC were on better terms. With all of these points taken as a whole, Boston 2024 seemed anything but a lark—even as early as the fall of 2013, proponents could reasonably argue that Boston was the frontrunner—ahead of any city in the

world—to host the 2024 Summer Games.

Some saw the 2024 Games as an opportunity to showcase Boston to the world, but Dempsey, Kerr, and Yunits saw the bid as a threat to their city’s bright future. The trio zeroed in on the fundamental problem with the International Olympic Committee’s bidding process: the IOC’s Olympic “auction” was designed to produce bids that led to great outcomes for the IOC, but couldn’t guarantee the same for the bid cities. Winning cities almost always overbid for the right to host the Games, even while Olympic boosters tried to reassure skeptical residents that they were getting a good deal on a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity. The three friends concluded that the exact same dynamics were at play in Boston.

Just as troubling to Dempsey, Kerr, and Yunits was the fact that the civic institutions and watchdog organizations that normally might raise concerns about a costly megaproject seemed to be staying silent. Sam Tyler, president of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, a watchdog organization, had told the Boston *Herald* that an Olympics was “a cost we cannot afford” when Menino and Fish had first opposed the concept in March of 2013. Now that powerful figures in Boston’s business community were lining up behind the bid, Tyler and others in similar positions were mum. Some of Boston 2024’s boosters sat on the boards of directors of these organizations and provided them with substantial funding. (For example, Fish’s Suffolk Construction had a seat on the board of Tyler’s organization.) Even Olympic skeptics in the business community were too polite, or too intimidated, to publicly question the wisdom of a bid. Few elected officials seemed eager to take on some of the most powerful men in the state. Opposition to Boston 2024 would have to come from the grass roots. There in Kerr’s living room, Dempsey, Kerr, and Yunits decided to organize an effort to oppose the bid. They settled on a straightforward name for their effort: No Boston Olympics.

*Excerpted from No Boston Olympics: How and Why Smart Cities Are Passing on the Torch, by Chris Dempsey and Andrew Zimbalist, University Press of New England, 2017.*