

Emerging Discourses: Olympic Bids

Robert K. Barney

Professor Emeritus – Western University

To Host or Not to Host, That is the Question!

The Benefits and Detriments for Urban Populations in Weighing a City's Decision to Bid for Hosting Olympic Summer Games

When a group of civic-minded citizens of an urban metropolis arrives at a decision to “go for the gold” and lodge a bid to the International Olympic Committee to host “the greatest sports show on earth,” as well as the most expensive, a fundamental requirement is to accompany such a bid with a declaration of citizen support for the project. This is most often reflected in the form of a referendum result. And why not! After all, it is the city's citizenry, current and future, that will bear the tax burden costs inherent in the long-term maintenance and operation of the facilities and infrastructure in place after the great festival has “left town;” in effect, to put in vernacular terms, they'll have to “live with it.” This “dilemma” is brought home to us in graphic fashion by a development in Denver, Colorado as I write this essay. One year ago Denver's mayor, together with a citizen group supporting his position, announced intentions to put the “Mile High City” forward as a candidate to host future Olympic Winter Games, perhaps in 2026, or beyond. An opposition group to the mayor's initiative sought to organize a “Denver Nolympic” campaign.

I was invited to Denver to speak to that group on the theme of this essay—Benefits and Detriments to Hosting Olympic Games. Inherent in making bid decisions, of course, is the specter of underwriting substantial Olympic cost-related elements, as well as possible (probable??) revenue deficits, with citizen tax dollars, or “public monies.” Thus, the bid committee must be a “seller” and the public a “buyer” of the bid. Past history on these matters tells us that, in supporting the contribution of their tax dollars for hosting, it is critical that the public fully realize which “bid-extolled” legacy-benefits are reasonably certain to occur and equate in positive fashion to their own and future generations' urban living circumstances. I return to the current Denver situation at the conclusion of this essay.

Thus, in consideration of the remarks above, one might ask, what are the Olympic cost-specific elements that, without much doubt, impact favorably or unfavorably on the post-Olympic urban lives of the population? In other words, what are the specific elements of preparing for and executing the Games, the historical legacy of which tells us that a citizen will get either “‘the best’ or ‘the least’ bang for his/her tax buck?”

When one looks at the positive side of the hosting legacy, the parameter of enhanced transportation infrastructure is most obvious. Air, rail, and road transportation improvements are absolutely fundamental considerations for urbanites. Expansion and improvement of existing subway systems, arterial freeways, and airport facilities are prime examples that impact greatly on everyday urban lives. Investment in them is good investment. So, too, is investment in state-of-the-art information, communication, and security systems put in place for the Games. Their continued maintenance and operation is well worth their original and ongoing revenue investment. Each can be linked to the safety of individuals living in

environments often rife with crime, much of it violent in nature. For urbanites, too, environmental elements offer important prospective legacies from the Games. Increased public space in the form of parks, trails, and reflection areas, along with projects that beautify urban surroundings, are Olympic-associated elements that affect in beneficial ways the more unsavory qualities of impacted urban living (air and noise pollution, traffic congestion, stressed sanitation facilities). In general, then, these are the more important elements presented to citizens in an Olympic bid that can be rationally defended as elements that have merit with regard to urban living and for which investment in them from tax revenues is justifiable.

On the negative side of the equation, however, is the often-made claim by bid committees that investment in state-of-the-art sports facilities to serve the Games and for the continued use of future generations is a sound investment. This argument is fraught with problems. History shows us that following the Games, in general, Olympic sports facilities either stand unused in “white elephant” status, eventually falling into disrepair and a derelict state, or to function in an alarming deficit rate between limited revenue gained from user fees balanced against necessary maintenance and operation costs. There are at least three possibilities to prevent this sad situation: (1) market the use of the facility to a permanent client(s) for costs near that of maintenance/operation, (2) at the outset of their planning, locate such facilities adjacent to or in the neighborhood proximity of educational institutions, universities that have active sports and physical recreation programs for students and the public alike, and (3) construct sport facilities in temporary status, to be decommissioned, deconstructed, salvaged following the Games, and the vacated urban space to be re-developed. Despite these qualifications, the worthiness of the sports facility argument from Olympic bid committees, at least relative to “long term” consequence on urban lives and pocketbooks, should be viewed with much skepticism. So, too, should my final remark on the subject; the argument is often made by bid committees to its public constituents “that hosting the Games will have lasting positive effects on tourism and thus great economic benefits for the city.” This argument, quite simply, carries little currency. Studies show that, yes, tourism spikes during the games, but returns to normal pre-Games figures quite rapidly. Finally, the argument (and I myself have been guilty of once making it), that the extraordinary global exposure that an Olympic City receives through world-wide television coverage launches it towards being known as “world class,” translating into both domestic and international business investment opportunities, is a “pipe-dream.” At the time when an Olympic Host City gains such “Olympic” distinction, with rare exceptions, it has already long been held as “world-class.”

Thus, in general, a committee bidding for Olympic Summer Games, especially in presenting arguments to its primary constituency, the city’s tax-paying populace, should underscore the benefits to be derived from hosting, in terms of improving urban transportation, information, communication, and security systems, and the city’s environmental picture. To be approached with much less fervor, indeed skepticism, are arguments related to the legacies that might be accrued from state-of-the-art sport facilities, tourism certainties, and business investment.

Finally, I return to the Denver case, and a rather sensational development ripe with the prospect of “accountability precedent” in Olympic global context. In the wake of a continued interest by Denver civic leaders towards hosting Olympic Winter Games, the Denver *Nolympic* force swung into action, pursuing a city-wide campaign of petition signature-gathering to present to the Denver Elections Division. The quest: an effort to place a “yes” or “no” vote on the “run-off city-wide election ballot due to occur on 4 June 2019.

The issue: “. . . before the City and County of Denver expends any municipal resources on pursuing a bid to host the Olympics, and before the taxpayers of Denver become liable for cost overruns, the people of Denver must first approve the decision with a vote at the polls.” On 7 January 2019 the *Let Denver Vote* initiative, an extension of the work of the *Nolympic* forces, presented the City of Denver’s Elections Division with a petition, supported by 4,365 signatures, precisely 361 signatures short of qualification for the June city-wide “run-off” ballot. By 5 February 2019, 688 additional signatures, validated by the Elections Division, were added to the petition, surpassing the number of signatures needed (5,053) by 327.¹

If the response on the “yes/no” ballot is in favor of a “yes” vote, the dictum will be etched into Denver’s Civic Law under the Voter Protection Ordinance Statutes. And, if passed, the ordinance will remain in effect until such time as it can be overturned in a similar ballot vote. In announcing “our Volunteer Appreciation Party and Campaign Update on February 11 . . . to celebrate and to hear about important next steps, spokesperson for the *Let Denver Vote* folks, Christine O’Connor, was jubilant: “We’re excited to give Denver voters a voice in determining whether to spend taxpayer money to bid for or host a future Olympics in the Mile High City.”² Yes indeed, the people have spoken. If passed into law, the precedent is towering for the Modern Olympic Movement, giving the discrete population most affected by hosting an Olympic Games the final authority, at least in the expenditure of public monies. Will this, if it becomes reality, pave the way in the future for Olympic Games to be financed wholly from private revenue sources? And, what is the Denver implication of State/Province and or Federal funding? Stay tuned for the June vote.

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¹ For details of this announcement, see “Let Denver Vote Citizen’s Initiative Makes the 2019 Ballot in Denver,” http://web-extract.constantcontact.com/v1/social_annotation?inrterlink_uri=2D6QvZi&ima...2/7/2019.

² Email, Let Denver Vote Committee to Robert K. Barney, 7 February 2019.