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TRIBUNE/ WGN POLL

Olympic opposition getting second wind as support in Chicago fades

47 percent of Chicagoans polled favor the bid, but that support had been at 61 percent in February

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Tribune reporters

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Support in Chicago for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games has dwindled, with residents now sharply divided over whether the city should host the Games, a Tribune/WGN poll has found.

Nearly as many city residents oppose Mayor Richard Daley's Olympic plans, 45 percent, as support them, 47 percent. And residents increasingly and overwhelmingly oppose using tax dollars to cover any financial shortfalls for the Games, with 84 percent disapproving of the use of public money.

The poll comes a month before the International Olympic Committee selects the host city for the 2016 Olympics. Chicago is competing against Tokyo, Madrid and Rio de Janeiro.

The new results show slippage from the 2-to-1 support found in a Tribune poll in February, and experts said the findings could hurt Chicago's chances.

"When less than half of the folks polled indicate they'd be willing to support the Olympics, that's certainly not an enthusiastic mandate for bringing the Games to Chicago," said sports finance expert Dennis Howard of the University of Oregon. "I can't speak for the IOC members who will be making the decision, but I'd be fairly certain this would not help the cause for Chicago."

Patrick Ryan, who is leading the Chicago 2016 bid committee, declined to comment Wednesday about the poll results. But this morning, the committee issued a statement saying the poll was taken at a time when some taxpayers had lingering questions about whether they would be protected in the event of financial losses.



"In the days since this poll was conducted, those questions have been answered and those concerns have been alleviated," said the committee's spokesman, Patrick Sandusky.

Sandusky noted that the Civic Federation and the IOC issued reports stating that Chicago 2016's plan was financially responsible and posed "minimal risk to taxpayers." He added that aldermen have given the committee "high marks" for its plan.

Also, Sandusky said, polling is only one way to evaluate community sentiment. He said the committee has raised \$70 million in private donations and that more than 20,000 volunteers support the bid.

The telephone survey of 380 Chicago registered voters, conducted Aug. 27 through Monday by Market Shares Corp., has a margin of error of 5 percentage points.

The Tribune/WGN poll is the first measure of public sentiment since Daley did an about-face in June, saying he would sign the standard host city contract giving the city full financial responsibility for any losses -- a move that triggered a firestorm of criticism. Until then, the city had been lobbying for amendments to the contract that would recognize the city's limited guarantees.

Poll respondents made it abundantly clear that they disapprove of Daley's promise of an unlimited guarantee in the event the Games lose money, with 75 percent opposed.

In a city already upset over the privatization of parking meters and worried about further cutbacks in government services, those respondents who talked to reporters expressed concerns about the economy, the cost of hosting the Games and traffic congestion.

Even a majority of those who favor the Olympics opposed using taxes to cover losses and were against the unlimited guarantee.

Joyce Thoele, one of several poll respondents who spoke with the Tribune, said she did not believe Daley and others who said taxpayers are not at risk. She opposes Daley's Olympic plans and said she would not attend any events if the Games come here.

"I'm against this because it's going to cost us taxpayers more money," said Thoele, 76, of the Northwest Side. "The older I get, the more I don't trust Chicago politicians."

Mary Beth Nick, who lives in West Rogers Park, said the Olympics were not worth the disruption they would cause. "And I think we should concentrate on improving the quality of life in the city for more than a lot of visitors who are going to be here for a fortnight," she said.

North Side resident Melanie Payne said she was ambivalent about the Olympics. She said the Games would provide an international showcase for the city, which she called the "most wonderful place to live." But she wondered about costs.

Daley and members of his Chicago 2016 bid committee said most costs will be covered by revenues from the Olympics, developer financing and donations. They project making money but have lined up \$750 million in city and state guarantees in case of losses.

Chicago 2016 also has lined up \$1 billion in private insurance coverage to protect taxpayers in the event of natural disasters, cancellation of the Games or a collapse of development financing.

The Tribune/WGN poll was conducted over five days, beginning the day after the Civic Federation released a report that was generally supportive of the 2016 committee's financial plans.

Aaron Williams-Banks, a college student who works part time for the Chicago Park District, favors the Games and believes taxpayers are adequately protected.

"We need a boost to our economy," he said. "This is a great thing. The Olympics will help the city."

When the Tribune last took the pulse of city residents on the Olympics in February, 61 percent supported the Games compared with 47 percent now. Opposition has grown from 26 percent in February to 45 percent now.

The IOC conducted its own poll in February, finding that 67 percent of the residents in Chicago and the suburbs were in favor.

The IOC did not measure the sentiments of just city residents, as both Tribune polls did.

Since the last Tribune poll, feelings against using tax money to cover any shortfalls have grown stronger, with 84 percent opposed now, compared with 76 percent in February.

The extent to which the new poll influences IOC voters on Oct. 2, when the winning city is announced, will depend in large part on whether the results change the political landscape, said Kevin Wamsley, an Olympic historian at the University of Western Ontario. He said the fresh poll results could provide fodder for opponents.

Kevan Gosper of Australia, one of the longest-sitting IOC members, said he believed Chicago's bid was gaining traction among Olympic voters.

But he also said community support was an important element.

"Normally," Gosper said, "you would hope public sentiment would be building as a candidate city approaches the competition."

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