



Imagine what hosting 2016 Olympics would've cost cash-strapped Chicago

Phil Rosenthal - Chicago Tribune philrosenthal@chicagotribune.com - July 19, 2015



A rendering of the Douglas Park BMX Track from the city's failed 2016 Olympics bid. Chicago hosting an Olympics would be like staging

its own wake. Best-case scenario, it's a great party where everyone says wonderful things about it. But no matter what, when it's over, the city's buried, writes Phil Rosenthal. (CHICAGO 2016)

Sometimes the punch to the gut is what saves you, even if you don't realize it immediately. When you're doubled over, the bullet headed for your head whizzes harmlessly past.

So it was with Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Olympics. Remember that?

The bad news: We didn't get the Games.

The good news: We didn't get the Games.

Whatever Chicago felt about six years ago when International Olympic Committee voters

Chicago dodges its funeral

Imagine what 2016 Olympics would've cost

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quickly ousted it from finalist contention, ultimately selecting Rio de Janeiro, imagine if they had actually chosen this city.

The legacy of Olympics for hosts is that of unneeded venues, debt and tightly focused short-term economic boosts that are hard to discern long-term.

Would Chicago 2016 have been a point of civic pride? Undoubtedly.



[\\$730M deal shows how Chicago may use long-term debt for short-term costs](#)

A magnet for job creation? For a time.

Exciting? For many.

Profitable? For a very select few.

And then the bills come due.

Take the concentric circles of fiscal hell in which Chicago finds itself and multiply them by five, as in the five interlocking rings of the Olympic logo, with the opening ceremony just about a year away.

Boosters to this day swear we could have pulled it off and been the better for it. That was more plausible back when we didn't know how many other things we enjoyed under Mayor Richard M. Daley but couldn't really afford, excesses for which we still pay dearly.



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The metropolitan area, the state, perhaps neighboring states and the federal government would not just be racking up more bills they could ill-afford to pay for the 2016 Olympics, diverting resources needed elsewhere.

They would be struggling to get preparations done in time because that's the way it always goes, even in places where money and labor are no object. And, Olympics or not, they're always an object.

Being a spectator is cheaper and more enjoyable.

Seriously, watch Wisconsin legislators contort themselves like world-class gymnasts to justify what they're doing to, say, education in the state while potentially funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to support a new arena for the wealthy owners of pro basketball's Milwaukee Bucks.



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In the Tribune's recent account of how costly it is for Chicago under Mayor Rahm Emanuel to use long-term bonds for short-term financial relief, we were reminded again how the city grapples still with the profligate tab Mayor Daley ran up on his way out of office.

Among expenses mentioned were those associated with the Daley-backed Olympics bid, the bid that Daley said wouldn't cost the taxpayers. As if.

Such is the history of budget-busting overspending connected with hosting the Games that there are a lot of smart people in Boston, selected as the U.S. contender for hosting the 2024 Olympics, already trying to get out of its commitment even to compete in the IOC sweepstakes.

Government officials in Tokyo, already picked as 2020 host, said Friday they will scrap their long-touted plans for the centerpiece venue and start over in response to pragmatism and righteous public outrage as costs ballooned past \$2 billion.

That's just for the main Olympic stadium.

Beyond the expense for Chicago, consider the anxiousness among residents and businesses about security, safety and sacrifice. If the upside far outweighs the much-trumpeted turn as host of the 2012 NATO summit that too many people have forgotten, so too would the risks.

Some Chicagoans flipped out when a few streets and a bit of parkland were surrendered to the National Football League for its three-day draft this spring. Ever read what the IOC requires of host cities? Invading countries demand less deference, control and real estate.

Chicago hosting an Olympics would be like staging its own wake. Best-case scenario, it's a great party where everyone says wonderful things about it. But no matter what, when it's over, the city's buried.

Montreal needed decades to pay off the 1976 Olympics, and things have only gotten more expensive since then. Los Angeles, the 1984 site, is probably the only U.S. city that should ever try to host the Summer Games, because the footprint is in place.

A couple of weeks or so ahead of the 1996 Games in Atlanta, I remember running into Mayor Daley at Moody Bible Institute's Solheim Center, where the U.S. Olympic men's basketball team was holding a practice. Already he was contemplating a future Olympics bid.

Daley downplayed the expense and other potential downsides, as he did with way too many things. He said Atlanta was fortunate to have beaten the heritage pick of Athens (eventually picked for 2004) for '96. It was an excuse to build.

"They need it," Daley said.

There's room for debate on that point, in all Olympic cities and not just in Atlanta, where the Olympic Stadium was to be a functional legacy landmark once downsized into a home for the Atlanta Braves. The Braves plan to abandon it after next season for a new ballpark now under construction.

Chicagoans knew all this going in, or should have, and yet ultimately we were stung when the IOC knocked the wind out of us on the first ballot almost six years ago. Most of us didn't realize the campaign was doomed by internecine IOC politics well before President Barack Obama, Daley, Oprah Winfrey and other Chicago boosters arrived in Copenhagen, Denmark, to show their support.

That this group in particular could so badly read an audience, so completely misjudge their electorate, was staggering at the time. Today it's cause for gratitude.

Fairly or not, Chicago and Illinois are linked with Athens and Greece in enough ways. We don't need another.

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- The Olympics were going to be the endgame. It is rude and disrespectful to even write that no one knew the financial damage of Daley's reign. The alderfools and state politicians all knew or just looked the other way. Just like they do now.

bwillis

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Posted:

Ah, Phil – where to begin. First, thanks for this great piece of analysis SIX YEARS TOO LATE. You have reached the conclusion that No Games Chicago reached in 2008. Our web site, <http://www.nogameschicago.com>, is still up and contains all the research and reporting that you and your colleagues at the Chicago Tribune and other local media outlets did NOT do or acknowledge.

In fact, aside from Ben Joravsky at the Chicago Reader, there was virtually NO critical reporting on the bid effort. Quite the opposite – Fred Eychaner, the owner of the so-called Progressive Talk Radio and Sam Zell, then the owner of your newspaper, were listed as Cash Contributors to the 2016 Committee at the “\$100,000+” level. CBS2 Chicago, Crain’s Business, NBC, NBC5-Telemundo, the Sun-Times Media Group, ABC 7 Chicago, Comcast Sports, FOX-TV Chicago, WPWR and WTTW all gave cash and donated services to the bid effort.

In Copenhagen, a leader of the winning Rio contingent thanked No Games Chicago for its work convincing Chicago citizens that the costs of the games would be ruinous, work the Chicago media SHOULD have doing.

When the media cheers official plans and silences thoughtful critics, the public loses. This news blackout continues to this day when critics question top-down planning and unexamined scams such as The Central Area Plan, privatization, Tax Increment Financing and other officially sanctioned plans blessed by the Chicago Tribune and other local media platforms. This lack of media analysis of City Hall planning, coupled with our docile, Rubber Stamp City Council has left local taxpayers naked and vulnerable to equally bad deals.

Phil, there was a rag tag group of volunteers who very much DID “imagine what 2016 Olympics would’ve cost.” We’re glad you are now one of them. Keep it up.

Longer reply, posted to Facebook:

Ah, Phil – where to begin. First, thanks for this great piece of analysis SIX YEARS TOO LATE. You have reached the conclusion that we – the unpaid and unheralded volunteers at No Games Chicago – reached in 2008 when we started organizing. Our first public forum was at UIC on January 29, 2009. Didn’t see you there. Our web site, <http://www.nogameschicago.com>, is still up and contains all the research and reporting that you and your colleagues at the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times and other local media outlets did NOT do or even acknowledge. We reported on Montreal’s 30 year debt. We cited dozens of academic and first hand reports of debt, civil liberties abuse, lying, scandal, cost overruns and more from previous bids. We reported and even published examples of the infamous Host City Contract – which we labeled the Blank Check. We went to Lausanne, Switzerland – to the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee in June of 2009 to tell the IOC “No thank you.” Didn’t see you there. In fact we did see your colleague Phil Hirsch, a leading Olympic supporter, who was openly hostile to us and tried to get us ejected from the Palace Hotel when we were mingling with IOC staff, members of other candidate cities and the international press on June 18.

Oh, it was a rough summer. Embarrassed by the lack of support after meeting with the IOC in Lausanne when the details of the Blank Check were made public, the mayor called for a “50 Wards in 50 Days” community meeting plan to shore up support. We went to every one of those meetings to pass out information and to provide an alternative narrative (in fact, the very one you are articulating in your column). Didn’t see you there. Finally, when the IOC met in Copenhagen in October to vote we sent our team of delegates to deliver more material to the IOC – getting past the Secret Service, the local police, the Danish army and the private security firm hired by the 2016 Committee. Must have missed you there, as well. In fact, aside from Ben Joravsky at the Chicago Reader, there was virtually NO critical reporting on the Chicago bid effort. Quite the opposite – Fred Eychaner, the owner of the so-called Progressive Talk Radio and Sam Zell, then the owner of your newspaper, were listed as Cash Contributors to the 2016 Committee at the “\$100,000+” level. CBS2 Chicago, Crain’s Business, NBC, NBC5-Telemundo, the Sun-Times Media Group, ABC 7 Chicago,

Comcast Sports, FOX-TV Chicago, the Korea Times, USA Today, WPWR and WTTW all gave mountains of cash and donated services to the bid effort.

In Copenhagen, a leader of the winning Rio contingent thanked No Games Chicago for its work –both convincing Chicago citizens that the costs of the games would be ruinous and helping the IOC see the growing lack of citizen support for the games.

When the media cheers official plans and silences thoughtful critics, the public loses. This news blackout continues to this day when No Games organizers and others question top-down planning and unexamined scams such as The Central Area Plan, privatization, Tax Increment Financing and a host of other officially sanctioned plans blessed by the Chicago Tribune and other local media platforms. This lack of media analysis of City Hall planning, coupled with our docile Rubber Stamp City Council has left the taxpayer in Chicago completely naked and vulnerable to insider trading, equally bad deals and the long history of big concrete, Loop-Centric city planning that has starved most of Chicago's neighborhoods.

Phil, there was a rag tag group of volunteers who very much DID “imagine what 2016 Olympics would’ve cost.” We’re glad you are now one of them. Keep it up.