

With the Games now so close, harsh reality is setting in

Many in B.C. are questioning whether hosting the Olympics was such a good idea after all

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There comes a point in the runup to every Olympics when those living in the host city and surrounding environs begin questioning whether it was such a good idea after all.

Many in B.C. have arrived at that juncture.

The cheers that went up six years ago when Vancouver-Whistler was awarded the 2010 Winter Olympics have long since faded. Now, with the Games less than four months away, reality is starting to set in.

The Games don't happen without considerable sacrifice on the part of the local citizenry. There are also moral challenges and ethical considerations along the way that make people question the essential nature of the Olympics.

The Vancouver Organizing Committee recently released its updated transportation plan. Its message to most everyone living in Greater Vancouver was simple: your daily commute into the city is about to change, dramatically.

Even though the Olympics won't start until Feb. 12, some roads in the city will be closed next month. And during the Games, you won't want to even think about driving downtown.

Those who aren't attending the Games because they either have no interest, couldn't afford a ticket, or weren't lucky enough to get their hands on one – which would constitute about 95 per cent of those living in Greater Vancouver – aren't likely to be thrilled about having their lives inconvenienced for several months for a party they're not attending.

Then there are the costs.

The price tag of an Olympics is always an issue. But it becomes even more of one when the provincial government sponsoring it and underwriting some of its costs suddenly finds itself in a financial jam and has to start slashing funding for social programs and things like high-school sports. You want to create Olympic resentment? That's a good way to start.

There are few thrilled either about proposed legislation that would give the police authority during the Games to enter the homes of people living within designated Olympic zones and to seize any signs being publicly exhibited that promote a competitor of a Games sponsor.

What country are we living in again?

Meantime, businesses are being asked to donate employees to work for VANOC during the Games. This, at a time when many of these companies are just now crawling out from underneath the carnage of the recession and when word is leaking out that VANOC is paying millions of dollars in bonuses to its own staffers.

Huh? How does that work?

Those are just a few of the things likely bothering people as the Olympics near. But clearly we are in the throes of a pre-Olympic funk. You can feel it.

The Innovative Research Group recently surveyed 3,416 Canadians online about the Olympics – including 549 in B.C.

Asked if they were excited about the coming Games, 71 per cent of British Columbians said they were either not very excited or not excited at all. Only nine per cent said they were very excited. That compares to 54 per cent of Canadians who were either not very excited or not excited at all and 14 per cent who said they were very excited.

Then the pollsters asked people if, based on what they had read, seen and heard about the benefits and costs of the Olympics, they thought it was a good idea. In B.C., only 20 per cent said it was a good idea. Forty-two per cent said it was a mistake, while 36 per cent said they wouldn't know until after the Games were over. (Two per cent didn't know).

Canada-wide, the numbers are a little better. Only 19 per cent feel the Olympics were a mistake, while 31 per cent said it was a great idea and 44 per cent think we won't know until after they're over. (Six per cent didn't know).

Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative, told me yesterday he was shocked by the results.

“We thought that, by and large, most people in B.C. would have thought the Olympics were a good idea,” he said. “But clearly there are not many people gung-ho about it. I suspect there's a few things at play here but in the end we're talking about an event that is only going to be enjoyed by a few.”

In my view, it's too early to say whether playing host to the Games was a good idea or not. We haven't seen the final balance sheet. We haven't seen the final medal count, either.

In the end, that may have the greatest influence on how we ultimately feel.

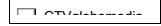
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