



The Olympics, with its huge, one-time influx of economic, social, and cultural capital, are a huge challenge—and an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy of sustainability. **BY ROB VANWYNSBERGHE, PHD**

The Olympic Games: A home for a sustainable “mega-event”

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE OLYMPIC Games are in the news these days, together. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has committed the Olympic Games to sustainable development and considers the environment as the third pillar of the Olympic movement (sport and culture are the other two). For example, organizers of the 2006 Winter Games in Torino recently announced that they will buy carbon credits and set up renewable energy projects abroad in order to offset the over 100,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions that their venues and operations will produce. Similarly, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has signed an agreement to reduce environmental pollutants and to raise public awareness with Beijing Olympic Games officials. And the 2012 Games in London has adopted the motto “Toward the One Planet Olympic Games” in

announcing to the world its commitment to becoming the first sustainable Games.

As a sociologist who studies sustainability, health promotion, and the Olympic Games, I believe that the Olympic Games in Vancouver-

Whistler are well placed to contribute to the ‘greening’ of the Games. This brief essay makes the case that the greening of the Games could lead to a legacy of a sustainable and healthy community.

In such a short piece, it is impossible to fully explain why a sustainable and healthy community is a feasible and desirable legacy for the 2010 Games. The following quote is useful in

outlining this argument.

“Sustainable communities are towns and cities that have taken steps to remain healthy over the long term. Sustainable communities have a strong sense of place. They have a

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vision that is embraced and actively promoted by all of the key sectors of society, including businesses, disadvantaged groups, environmentalists, civic associations, government

ingful and broad-based citizen participation; and economic self-reliance.”

—Institute for Sustainable Communities
<www.iscvt.org>

“To begin to achieve a sustainable and healthy community legacy, the Olympic Games must be seen for what it is, a mega-event. That is, the Games will be a one-time massive influx of human, cultural, and economic capital, all of which is commandeered to conduct the high-level planning and building necessary to host the visitors who attend and viewers who watch it all unfold.”

Translation: it is easier, but less beneficial for sustainability to “purchase carbon credits” and “raise awareness” than to actually engage local people in meaningful dialogue regarding their sustainability communities. The benefits of a community-oriented approach to sustainable and healthy communities are three-fold.

agencies, and religious organizations. They are places that build on their assets and dare to be innovative. These communities value healthy ecosystems, use resources efficiently, and actively seek to retain and enhance a locally based economy. There is a pervasive volunteer spirit that is rewarded by concrete results. Partnerships between and among government, the business sector, and non-profit organizations are common. Public debate in these communities is engaging, inclusive, and constructive. Unlike traditional community development approaches, sustainability strategies emphasize: the whole community (instead of just disadvantaged neighborhoods); ecosystem protection; mean-

First, we learn to extend our concern beyond our immediate future to the broader community and the social and natural systems of time and location. Second, we gain the will to address our perceived lack of control by recognizing our assets. Third, we seek information about the facts that explain the state of the world, its various trends and limits and how this evidence absolves or implicates our daily choices.¹

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1 Jepson, Edward J (2001). “Sustainability and Planning: Diverse Concepts and Close Associations.” *Journal of Planning Literature*. 15(4): 499-510.

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level planning and building necessary to host the visitors who attend and viewers who watch it all unfold. Mega-events are organized by a number of public agencies, private firms, and non-profit enterprises. The host city requires this network of agencies to address the rigid timelines, packaged images, and public consultations necessary to host these events. The key to social sustainability is to be just as innovative and entrepreneurial in capitalizing on the resources available to build local resources.

A coalition of community organizations has spent the last four years addressing the priority issues and challenges associated with a healthier and more sustainable community. Known as the Impacts on Community Coalition (IOCC), this group has members from such organizations as the Tenant Rights Action Coalition and Better Environmentally Sound Transportation. The IOCC was established in 2002 during the debate over Vancouver's bid for the Games. The organization's central goal then was to monitor the bid, and in the event the Games were granted to Vancouver, to monitor both the positive and negative effects for social, environmental, and economic urban processes in the city. The IOCC is interested in a socially sustainable 2010 Olympic Games. Today the IOCC seeks to partner with a broad cross-section of the region's citizens, community leaders, policy makers, and academics to monitor the Games in order to protect the homeless, provide local short- and long-term jobs, and

ensure that civil liberties are respected. This monitoring is designed to take the forms that establish networks, generate symbols, share authority, and enhance governance to improve our collective well-being.

Social sustainability is about broad-based linkages; it is concerned with integrating community organizations, local and regional government, the media, and ordinary people in fostering a shared vision of a healthy and sustainable community. The process of exploring our desired futures in relation to the Games is natural because we can build upon the good will and interest generated by the in winning the bid in 2003. Having already invested almost four years into a locally meaningful dialogue of the Games, there is a well-developed infrastructure of social networks, organizational assets, and other community engagement avenues to contribute to an informed, intense, but ultimately healthy debate about our collectively preferred future. In the recent past, we have done so by supporting a host of opportunities like the Mayor's Forums that led up to the City of Vancouver plebiscite on the Games. In fact, the plebiscite was instrumental to a July 2003 decision by the International Olympic Committee to grant Vancouver and Whistler the right to host the XIX Winter Olympic Games. The continuation of this legacy could be Vancouver-Whistler 2010's great contribution to sustainability in our region and the tradition of the Olympic Games. ■