Building Consent: Community Networks and Arena Development in Smaller Cities

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In recent decades the deterioration of community-owned sport and recreation facilities has plagued many North American towns and cities, to the chagrin of sport teams, their owners, and community users. As a result, municipal governments have struggled with the dilemma of caving to private sector pressures for new facilities while addressing public concerns over funding and who should pay. This has spawned a substantive body of academic scholarship examining the implications of the government subsidization of professional sports, and on the public construction of stadiums and arenas at the major league level (cf. Coates and Humphreys, 2003; Rosentraub, 1997; 2010). However, while larger cities and their professional sport teams have attracted widespread academic interest and popular attention, they are not the only ones that face this dilemma. Smaller cities, often attempting to mark their place within the urban hierarchy, are also struggling with their own stadium/arena development plans. Thus, although a number of examples of mid to small sized cities struggling with the stadium/arena debate exist, they have failed to capture scholarly attention. This is despite the fact that, on a per capita basis, the public’s financial burden may equal or exceed that faced by taxpayers in larger cities. To address this issue, the current paper focuses on the city of Abbotsford, B.C., and how proponents were able to mobilize public support for a property tax increase to fund a new arena as part of an urban infrastructure development plan.

Abbotsford, B.C. is a relatively young city of 140,000 residents, formed by the amalgamation of the districts of Abbotsford and Matsqui in 1995. Abbotsford is located in the Fraser Valley, west of Vancouver and just north of the U.S.-Canada border, situating the city in a very favorable position for trade and distribution. Over the past decade this socially and fiscally conservative, mid-sized Canadian city has experienced rapid growth but has lacked some of the community infrastructure found in other Canadian cities of equal size. To address this, and following a lengthy consultation phase, the municipal government of Abbotsford put forth a referendum in November 2006, seeking approval to proceed with development of three new public funded facilities: a Cultural Centre, Community Centre, and Entertainment and Sport Centre. The three projects were combined and marketed under the title ‘Plan A’. At the time of the referendum the projects were projected to cost the average homeowner an increase of $158 per year for the next 20 to 25 years. The cultural centre, including an art gallery and museum, would cost $29 per year; the community centre, $46 per year; and the entertainment and sports complex would cost $83 per year. In promoting these projects to the citizens of Abbotsford, and attempting to bolster support for the projects, proponents reached out to community organizations.

The current study seeks to explore the manner through which project proponents were able to garner broader support for Plan A, given the hefty property tax increases that were ultimately approved by Abbotsford taxpayers. To do so, a network theory approach was employed. Network theory has been utilized in the analysis and understanding of the structure of relationships that make up multi-organizational and individual partnerships. Networks can be best understood as “webs of relatively stable and ongoing relationships which mobilize and pool dispersed resources so that collective (or parallel) action can be orchestrated towards the solution of a common policy” (Kenis and Schneider 1991, p.36). Network analysis seeks to characterize the largely informal interactions between public and private sector actors, with distinct but dependent interests. While there has been limited application of network theory within sport studies, its potential was acknowledged by King (2009), who stated that the application of the theory would contribute to the better understanding of exchange-based relationships within the sport studies domain. Coupled with that is the limited application of network analysis in the attempt to aid communities in building stronger, more efficient networks for resource sharing and development (Provan, Veazie, Staten, and Tufefl-Shone 2005). As a result, the current study seeks to examine the stadium funding issue in an under-researched setting, while contributing to our understanding of successful community development partnerships.

The research strategy employed a qualitative approach; data was collected from local, regional, and national newspapers, interviews with city officials involved in the development process, and city archives and published reports. The data was coded to draw out the relevant partnerships, relationship building, and resource sharing.
which was occurring in Abbotsford related to the development of Plan A projects. It was then further analyzed to identify the expectations and motivating factors that contributed to the birth of the network and solidified the relationships among community stakeholders with a common goal. The findings show how proponents of Plan A relied on the formation of partnerships with community groups in order to gain legitimacy for the projects with skeptical citizens, and were successful despite the large increase in property tax. Through the creation of community partnerships, they were able to mobilize support for the development and legitimize the motivations of the pro-development city council. The network analysis of community partners in Abbotsford will provide officials and stakeholders in other cities with feedback on how to better assess their own role within the network, leading to improved relationship building and interaction, while increasing the possibility of successfully achieving their stated objectives. This has significant implications for cities, which are pursuing arena development as a pro-growth strategy and seeking to garner positive community support. It also has implications for those trying to understand how popular support is still obtained for projects that result in significant financial risk for their respective communities.

References


