Interrelationships between Political Actors, Financing, and Symbolic Meaning of Hosting the 2011 World Sledge Hockey Challenge

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In today’s global economy, many cities have adopted development strategies couched in the hosting of events. While mega-events including the Olympic Games and World Championships present most extreme examples of event-led development, many smaller-scale events may also play into this strategy. Event hosting is commonly studied in terms of place marketing and global competition (Andranovich, Burbank, & Heying, 2002; Gratton, & Preuss, 2008) or in terms of urban development and regeneration (Gold & Gold, 2008). Models of political schemes to support sport event hosting include the organization of coalitions in urban regimes (Misener & Mason, 2008). Consumerist-driven societies have systematically concentrated on spectacle and image surrounding hallmark events to attract outside investments rather than on providing accessible benefits for local citizens who do not hold the same political and economic power (Harvey, 1989).

The purpose of this study was to examine the politics and financing of the 2011 World Sledge Hockey Challenge (WSHC) held in London, Ontario, Canada. Specifically, the aim was to determine the political actors and motives at play in bidding for this particular event, and to discern how political power, the power of sport, and support of para-sport specifically affected the financing achieved through grants and sponsorship to run this event. Information for this case study was gathered through interviews with the local Director of Sport Tourism and with key members of the Host Organizing Committee involved in preparing grant applications and securing sponsorship.

While London, Ontario has succeeded in building a strong hosting portfolio of sporting events over the past decade, this phenomenon appears to exist outside the governance of an identifiable urban regime. Event hosting rather, relies on loose and temporary coalitions that exist to support specific events as they relate to individual organizational players. Tourism London, a division of the City of London, is notably the lead driver in bidding and hosting sporting competitions and events. As their name implies, the primary purpose of event hosting is symbolic and designed to propagate an image that will drive tourism and increase visibility of the city as a vibrant place to live, work, and play. Within this strategy, the “fit” of hosting an event such as the 2011 World Sledge Hockey Challenge, that does not provide major incentives of profit, tourism, or visibility, seems questionable. This paper will argue that the WSHC still held symbolic and strategic political meaning, but that this symbolism was directed inward at portraying an image of community, acceptance, and accessibility to the citizens of London. This local focus has implications in terms of obtaining community-based grant funding and achieving lasting local effects for everyday citizens.

This case study suggests that hosting sport events that vary from traditional urban motives of development and increasing competitiveness in a global market may offer a solution to the increasing disparity between the local benefits touted in major bids and the capitalistic development of consumer environments that are often the result of hosting hallmark events. Perhaps a system of transient coalitions has the potential to enable more meaningful local benefits than a powerful urban regime. Perhaps occasional variance toward a truly local focus is the key to a more sustainable hosting strategy. Events with a local focus have the ability to produce meaningful changes that directly benefit the sport enthusiasts within the city who are invariably recruited to support major bids for externally-focused events. This presents a new recommendation for event-hosting strategies as a way to ensure continued local buy-in to sport events.