Hosting “Big” Events in “Small” Cities: An Examination of Socio-Political Discourse and Residents’ Perceptions

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More and more cities of different sizes are competing to host larger scale sporting events with the intent of capitalizing on this expanding industry. Consistent with this trend, most research to date has focused on mega-events in larger cities (e.g., Solberg & Preuss, 2007). However, smaller-sized cities are taking similar approaches in going after events that are relatively “big,” requiring relatively substantial resources (including tax payers’ money). The primary arguments supporting these cities’ quests are that hosting events: generates economic benefits, provides opportunities to diversify the local industry, leads to urban and regional development (e.g., Misener & Mason, 2008), and aids in re-branding the city (e.g., Green, 2001). The case presented here is rather unique, since it focusses on a medium sized city (250,000 inhabitants) that recently embarked on this path. The event under investigation is a medium sized international youth sport event for children 12 to 15 years of age. The event was the first of this size that was strategically supported and organized by the local government with a broader urban development agenda in mind. Fifteen hundred athletes from 84 cities and 32 countries competed in eight different sport events: baseball, soccer, basketball, volleyball, tennis, swimming, gymnastics, and athletics, over the course of three days.

The event received extensive local media attention. A new aquatic centre was built because of the event with a price tag of $78 million. The city paid another $2.5 million to organize the games and the county council, representing the 8 surrounding municipalities (population of approximately 100,000), chipped in another $300,000. These substantial amounts of public funding triggered an interesting socio-political discourse. The purpose of this study is to illustrate and analyze this socio-political discourse which took place in the local media, to inform (or persuade) public opinion concerning how the strategy of hosting events benefits the local community. The following research questions guided the study: (1) What was the rationale of the political power to stage and financially support this first “big event” in the city?; (2) What claims were being made by local politicians and the local organizing committee prior to, during, and after the event?; (3) How did the socio-political discourse evolve and to what effect?; (4) What are the residents’ perceptions vis-à-vis the hosting of this event? The arguments revealed in the socio-political discourse analysis were compared with the general perceptions of two distinct groups of residents; those who attended the games as spectators and those who did not. Expectations are that perceptions of residents who are involved with the event are more favorable compared to those residents who are not involved (e.g., Balduck et al., 2011).

The analysis of the socio-political discourse was done through media framing (e.g., Sant & Mason, 2013). This entails an in-depth inventory and analysis of all arguments provided in local media, be it through radio, TV, written press, or blogs. Documents and notes from city council’s meetings were also analyzed. A total of 132 articles from the local press were collected: 40 articles in the pre-game period (up to 15 months prior to the games); 61 articles during the games; and 31 articles in the post-game period (up to two months following the games). Results revealed that the newspaper articles focussed on sport facilities and enhanced international recognition in the pre-game period. During the games, the emphasis was more sport specific as achievements of local athletes were highlighted. The predominant sentiment of the articles was praise for the games. Following the games, the sentiment of the content in media coverage changed drastically. At this stage, claims made prior to the event were questioned and publically challenged in a passionate manner.

Residents’ perceptions were collected through paper and pencil surveys over the course of three days during the event from: (1) residents who were event attendees (RES-EV n=574; on site surveys); and, (2) residents who did not attend the event (RES n=364; mall surveys). Approximately 65% of the total group lived in the city, while the other 35% lived in the surrounding municipalities. About 60% of the respondents were females; and 28% indicated they had difficulty making ends meet with their current income. These demographic characteristics were not significantly
different between both groups. In contrast, RES were significantly younger (M=36, SD=17) compared to the RES-EV (M=48, SD=15; p < .01). The questionnaire consisted of four parts: (1) knowledge and level of involvement with the event; (2) interest in sport (live spectating, participating, watching on TV, volunteering); (3) perceptions about the impact of the event; and, (4) demographic and geographic variables (i.e., residence, sex, age, and income). The perceptions include 4 dimensions, derived from existing scales (e.g., Balduck et al., 2011; Vargas et al., 2011; Zhou & Ap, 2009), but adapted for the event: (1) the feel-good-factor (4 items; Cronbach’s alpha = .72), social cohesion (4 items; Cronbach’s alpha = .89), importance/impact of new sport facility (3 items, Cronbach’s alpha = .87); and, (4) disorder and conflict (3 items; Cronbach’s alpha = .72). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The survey also included an open-ended question, enquiring about the perceived success factors of the event for the residents and/or the region. Results indicated that 87% of the RES were aware that the event was being hosted, and 85% RES-EV were not directly involved with the event, and simply attended the event as a spectator. Unsurprisingly, RES-EV showed significantly higher interests in live sport spectating (p < .001), TV watching (p < .001), and participation (p < .05). As expected, RES-EV scored significantly higher on three of the four perception dimensions, with the feel-good-factor as the highest score (RES-EV M=6.49, SD=0.74 vs RES M=6.02, SD = 1.15, p < .001), followed by social cohesion (RES-EV M=6.42, SD=0.79 vs RES M=5.99, SD = 0.97, p < .001), and the impact of the new sport facility (RES-EV M=5.63, SD=1.33 vs RES M=4.96, SD=1.47, p < .05). Scores for disorder and conflict were very low and not significantly different (RES-EV M=2.78, SD=1.55 vs RES M=2.74, SD=1.27, p = n.s.). Themed success factors revealed by the residents were: (1) community unity/pride; (2) economic impact; (3) international recognition; (4) sport participation; (5) volunteerism; and, (6) construction of new facilities.

The dominant view in the residents’ perception was the social impact of the event; while the building of the aquatic centre (i.e., infrastructure development), economic development, and enhanced international profile were the primary drivers to convince residents to support the hosting of the event. These findings are very similar to claims made for the hosting of mega-events (e.g., Sant & Mason, 2013). During the event, some politicians and the media emphasized the positive social impacts that were occurring. Post event, a lively debate unfolded after the economic benefits came under scrutiny. Immediately following this debate, city council decided to host another series of events requiring public funding. Interestingly, the mayor no longer emphasized economic impact as the primary driver for hosting these events (he actually tried to stay away from it), but mentioned: (1) city marketing, enhancing community pride, and opportunities for physical activity and sport participation as major benefits for hosting the events; (2) the importance and necessity of an event portfolio to create sustainable outcomes (e.g., Ziakas & Costa, 2011); and, (3) the need for an overarching organization (e.g., a sports council) for future purposes, such as strategic planning. This contribution illustrates how the public discourse threw local stakeholders off guard, and shaped subsequent reactions and outcomes. Through this example, researchers are encouraged to take part in this public discourse by sharing their knowledge with appropriate audiences, using appropriate avenues, thereby fulfilling societal duties to accurately inform the public. This study also contributes to the developing body of knowledge of the meaning of hosting events for smaller sized cities.