

Olympics: Gold, Silver, Bronze -- But Not Green

Martin A. Lee, AlterNet

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It will cost nearly \$2 billion to stage the Salt Lake City Olympics -- almost \$800,000 per athlete -- with U.S. taxpayers picking up about a quarter of the tab. Partly due to increased security, the Utah games, a 17-day sports spectacular ending on Feb. 25, will be the most expensive Winter Olympics ever. "These are not wasted funds," says International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Jacques Rogge. Such an investment, he says, leaves a "great legacy" to Olympic cities.

But in Salt Lake, they will leave another legacy as well: profound ecological consequences. The Winter Games, even more so than the Summer Games, are prone to wreaking havoc on the environment because they take place outdoors in relatively isolated, snow-covered, mountain areas that are suddenly overwhelmed by increased automobile traffic, waste production, and energy consumption.

Following the 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer, Norway, the IOC adopted an ambitious set of guidelines that emphasized environmental protection, sustainable development, and a "proactive" and "dynamic approach" to achieve green goals. The environment was touted as one of three pillars of the Olympics, along with sports and culture, and cities bidding for the Games had to trot out their green credentials.

Such considerations, however, have largely been abandoned in Salt Lake, and in the end the region will be likely left with significant environmental damage from the Olympics. "The only thing green about these Games," says Alexis Kelner, co-founder of the Utah environmental group Save Our Canyons, "is the color of the currency being thrown around."

Notorious for its political leaders who are overtly hostile to environmental regulations, Utah was a dubious choice to host what was mandated to be the first environmentally sound Winter Games. The Beehive state is also home to the Sagebrush Rebellion (which claims National Parks are illegal) and other rabid anti-ecology movements that oppose federal public land policies, while favoring unfettered resource exploitation.

Then how did Salt Lake manage to get the Winter Games? Illegal payoffs, rather than environmental factors, were paramount in the IOC's decision to hold the 2002 Olympics in Utah. Salt Lake City Olympic bid executives plied IOC delegates with seven million dollars worth of cash, gifts, lavish trips, plastic surgery for their spouses, and scholarships for their children. Supplying attractive escorts for visiting dignitaries wasn't particularly unique, but adding a year's supply of Viagra was an original flourish on the part of bid officials. Two Salt Lake Olympic organizers were subsequently indicted on federal bribery and conspiracy charges.

Emblematic of an entrenched culture of corruption within the Olympic hierarchy, the gift-giving scandal set the stage for a series of shady real estate deals that enriched several wealthy businessmen. Billionaire oilman Robert Earl Holding, a member of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee (SLOC) for the 2002 Olympics, used his high-powered political connections to secure Congressional approval of a lucrative land exchange that overrode federal environmental laws. Holding acquired 1378 acres at the base of the Snowbasin ski resort from the U.S Forest Service, and Congress gave him carte blanche to develop the region. Congress also pitched in a \$15 million subsidy for an access road to Holding's resort. From that point on, to use a ski metaphor, it was downhill for the natural environment.

Pristine mountain wilderness soon morphed into condos, restaurants, and ski runs. Parking lots encroached upon riverbed areas, degrading trout habitat and discharging waste run-off into the watershed. As approved by Congress, these developments were exempt from all the usual public review required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The waiver was justified, according to Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, in order to facilitate the staging of the Winter Olympics. But critics contend that the public was hoodwinked. "No land swap or other similar venture was necessary to stage the Games," says Howard Peterson, a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee's site selection team that evaluated Snowbasin as a venue for ski race competitions.

"The Snowbasin travesty is a stark example of greed run amok," says Tom Price, chairman of the Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), a volunteer organization set up by the Salt Lake Organizing Committee. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, the EAC collaborated with environmental groups and government officials in order to choose a road pathway to Snowbasin that would have the least impact on wetlands, streams, and hawk and owl habitats. The EAC also lobbied to protect vulnerable canyons in the Wasatch mountain range.

But the EAC wielded no real authority, and several members, including Ivan Weber, head of Utah's Sierra Club chapter, quit the committee after they concluded that ecological concerns were a low priority for SLOC. "When environmentalists would bring up an issue," Weber explained, "SLOC would say, 'It's too early to do anything,' and then at some point later would say, 'It would have been nice but it's too late now.'"

Weber compared the Olympic movement to "a dysfunctional family," which he attributes mainly to corporate sponsorship of the Games. "If you aren't going to come up with major bucks to support the Winter Olympics, then they won't want to talk to you," he says.

When the bidding scandal was exposed, some of SLOC's biggest corporate sponsors wavered and announced they were reconsidering their support for the 2002 Olympics. Mitt Romney, a leverage buy-out specialist and failed Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, was enlisted to resuscitate the fundraising effort and redo the budget. Shortly after Romney became president and CEO of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee in February 1999, he cut environmental spending from 6 million to less than \$1.5 million. This paltry sum, representing only one-tenth of one percent of the 2002 Olympic budget, spoke volumes about SLOC's commitment to the environment.

With meager resources at her disposal, Diane Conrad Gleason, director of environmental programs for SLOC, focused on educational projects, which included a children's video with public television's Bill Nye the Science Guy. Seminars on green themes encouraged Salt Lake hotel and restaurant managers to implement water and energy conservation techniques. Gleason also promoted an international tree-planting campaign. And she kept on mouthing the requisite incantations about hosting "the greenest Games ever." "Our goal," she asserted, "is not about environmental protection, we're about environmental improvement."

If there was ever a sporting event that required an image makeover, it was the 2002 Olympics. A PR-campaign trumpeting the Green Games served as a much-needed image-booster for a Winter Games tainted by scandal. "Get the word out and mention 'Green Games' as often as possible," Gleason told a group of volunteers, "because the more people hear that, the more they will believe it."

Public relations, however, could not mitigate the negative impact of major construction projects such as the ski jump at Winter Sports Park, which left a large, ugly gash on the mountainside. Even Romney admits they made a mistake. "It happened before I came on board," he stated.

When Salt Lake was vying to host the Winter Games, bid officials promised that every person who purchased a ticket to the 2002 Olympics would be able to ride public transportation to that event. But SLOC reneged on this pledge and adopted a transportation plan that relies heavily on private automobiles. Thirty-five million dollars were allocated to build new parking lots and expand old ones in order to accommodate a huge influx of traffic. SLOC acquired a fleet of 4000 gas-guzzling SUVs (which are exempt from U.S. clean air standards) to ferry athletes and others between ten venues and the Olympic Village, a 60 square-mile area. Chemical salts that pollute the watershed will be used to clear the snow and keep the roads open 24-hours-a-day. And air quality will suffer because of all the vehicular exhaust, which creates a sickly, yellow haze during winter temperature inversions in Salt Lake.

But SLOC's chief environmental officer sees a silver lining in the smog -- emissions credits. Various companies in Utah and other states pollute less than they are allowed, Gleason explains, and some have donated their unused pollution credits to the Olympics. These donations, she claims, will counterbalance any emissions increases related to the 2002 Games, resulting in "the first Olympics with net zero emissions."

Many critics scoff at the notion of trading emissions, as nothing can change the fact that more emissions will be discharged into the air because of the Olympics than would have been there otherwise. "It's a lot of smoke and mirrors and bad arithmetic," says a Utah state environmental official.

Recycling is also cited by Olympic officials as an environmental triumph for the games. Initially, they came up with a plan to mix waste and recyclables in one container, sort it off-site, and burn all the paper at a waste-to-energy conversion facility in Ogden, Utah, which had been repeatedly cited for pollution and compliance violations. Olympic organizers figured they could call it "recycling" because this process would produce energy for a nearby industrial park.

Strong objections from the GrassRoots Recycling Network and other national green organizations prompted Olympic organizers to improve plans to achieve "zero waste" through composting and recycling. Coca Cola, a leading Olympic sponsor, contributed extra funds for an advanced, two-bin recycling system that could conceivably eliminate ninety percent of the waste generated by the Winter Games. This effort, ironically, would be helped by tight security procedures, which forbid ticket-holders from bringing their own food and beverages. All food-related items used at Olympics venues would be made from biodegradable or recyclable material.

But critics consider this insufficient. "The Olympics should not only avoid being environmentally destructive, it should also be a showcase for sustainable development," says Peter Berg, director of the San Francisco-based Planet Drum Foundation and co-founder of Guard Fox Watch, an international project that monitors ecological issues related to the Winter Games. Two years ago, Berg and Japanese ecologist Kimiharo To met with Salt Lake Olympic officials and urged them to feature an array of green alternatives, including state-of-the-art solar panels, compost toilets, and dual-use plumbing systems for recycling "gray water" in athlete's quarters. "It would have set a precedent," Berg noted. "It would have been a model for future Olympics and other outdoor sports spectacles."

But no money was available to demonstrate new technologies. "What a shame," says Ivan Weber of the Sierra Club. "A crucial opportunity to raise awareness was squandered." Part of the problem, according to Weber, stems from the itinerant ethos of Olympic professionals "who travel like a circus crew, staging event after event with little or no concern for community or local environment."

When the 2002 Games are over, Olympic officials will leave behind a skeletal staff, while others move on to the next show. And the true cost of hosting the Salt Lake Olympics won't be clear until much later.

Martin A. Lee (martinalee117@yahoo.com) is the author of "Acid Dreams" and "The Beast Reawakens." 