

## **In the Northwest: Pricey Olympic bid and deep budget cuts ... hmmm**

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WHISTLER, B.C. -- With apologies to Papa Hemingway and poet John Donne, people in this posh ski resort are hearing a variation of the famous lines: Do not ask for whom the tolls bell. They ring for thee.

The B.C. government has floated the idea of ringing up a \$32 Canadian (about \$21 U.S.) roundtrip toll to improve the twisting Sea-to-Sky Highway between Vancouver and Whistler. The upgrade is crucial for British Columbia's bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

Our neighbor's Olympic campaign is gaining in intensity. It will reach a fever pitch in the next year, with the region's "Yanks" called on to give a neighborly boost. The Vancouver-Whistler application is pitted against five European locations plus Harbin, China, and Pyongchang, South Korea.

One group, the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, already has signed up to support Vancouver-Whistler and tout spillover benefits to Northwest states.

Still, this column is wary.

The Winter Olympics mean gold for athletes. And a successful bid will provide a gold mine for B.C. business interests that financed the election campaign of B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell.

But what if middle class families -- including those "Yanks" who ski and camp in B.C. -- are forced to foot the bill for the snowboards and circuses?

Sipping a pint of Kokanee Gold at Citta's Bistro last week, a Whistler-based businessman-outdoorsman told me, "The Olympics could bring us a lot of improvements or saddle us with many, many costs. We don't know yet. I have my suspicions."

Olympic boosterism is something to behold.

"I look at the idea to host this event as a salesman," Jack Poole, head of the B.C. Olympic bid, said at an announcement ceremony last November. "(It's) an opportunity to show off what we have," Premier Campbell chimed in.

Prime Minister Jean Chretien, during his rare Vancouver visits, is usually found on the exclusive Shaughnessy golf links. As a boost to the Winter Olympics, however, he has vowed to go helicopter skiing at Whistler. "You pick up the pieces at the end, but I will try," Chretien joked.

Canada's 2010 Olympic bid is lavishly subsidized. The federal and provincial governments are spending \$34 million (Canadian) to pursue the games. They have pledged up to \$310 million (C) apiece to pay for facilities.

Disturbingly, these outlays coincide with sweeping budget cuts in British Columbia.

No sector is taking a harder hit than recreation. The province is downsizing the number of parks and campgrounds where basic services are available.

According to British Columbia's official Web site, public toilets will be taken away from at least 33 provincial parks.

The forests ministry -- overseer of vast swaths of B.C. land -- will no longer maintain recreation sites. Back roads won't be maintained for recreation, once logging ceases.

Shortly after the 2002 Winter Olympics, Salt Lake City threw open its doors and hearts to the Paralympics competition for people with disabilities.

When they head for the outdoors, people in British Columbia with disabilities or whose children have special needs get official treatment that verges on chilling.

Previously, they received special passes to use B.C. parks and campgrounds. This season, Campbell's government canceled the passes. The disabled who want to camp now at a special rate must supply written confirmation that they receive disability benefits. It must be shown to the park operator together with photo identification.

All this is part of what Vancouver Sun columnist Stephen Hume calls "a question of priorities."

Premier Campbell has brushed aside the issue of how his government could subsidize the 2010 games while slashing spending on education, social services and recreation.

"The best social program we can have, the best preventative health care we can have, is a job in the hands of individual British Columbians," said the premier.

A good sound bite doesn't answer fundamental questions.

And then there is the environment.

Some Olympic Games go gentle on the host site. In Sydney, the summer games provided a reason to clean up and convert a toxic dump. Facilities were built with non-toxic materials. Public transit was used to shuttle fans between events.

Campbell's government does not seem to care about that as "SuperNatural British Columbia" bids to host the 2010 games.

The province appears poised to make deep reductions to the size of newly created South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park, north of Whistler.

As well, the government may let the provincial cabinet "modify" park boundaries to allow mines and transportation corridors. Garibaldi Provincial Park, which adjoins Whistler, is a prime candidate for modification.

And the government recently lifted a moratorium on the hunting of grizzly bears.

En route to Whistler, this writer encountered a charming retired couple taking a leisurely walk near the base of Shannon Falls near Squamish. Tolls for a round trip this far would be \$16 (C).

"Where can people like us afford to go?" asked Beth MacLean.

We ought to ask that question when Winter Olympic salesmen from the Great White North come calling, followed by what they call in parliament a "supplementary":

Is it sporting, in the Olympic spirit, to butcher park boundaries and blow away grizzly bears?