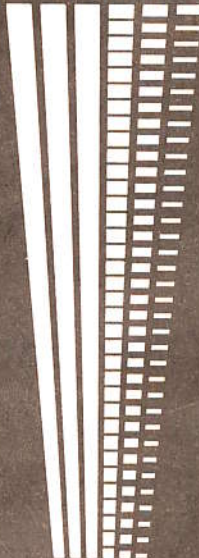




AN OLYMPIC PARADOX

BY JAMES H. EWERT JR.



Ask a typical Chicagoan what they think about

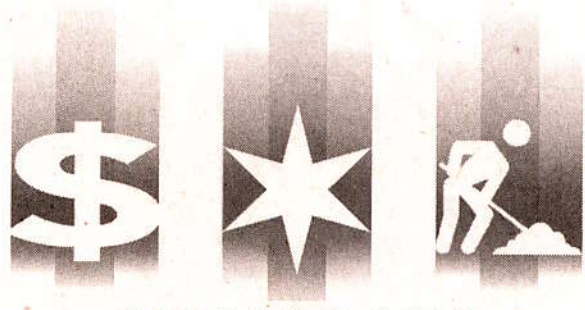
Chicago's opportunity and bid to host the 2016 summer Olympics and they (much like I did at first) might say it's a good idea, an interesting notion, a distant and far-off dream.

Shortly thereafter, a little dialog on the actual economic and practical implications further, and that typical Chicagoan (once again like I did) might conclude that it would be a fascinating sight—an inevitable disaster—but nonetheless an alluring possibility. Imagine throngs of athletic, corporate and international tourists descending on the Windy City during its most vibrant and busy time of year to applaud Chicago as a “city that works”, as the “global” and “green” city Mayor Richard M. Daley has always envisioned it to be. It would be spectacular, oh yes! Imagine a group of drunken and rowdy foreigners being beat senseless by power drunk cops, or imagine a foreign dignitary's car being illegally towed away and sold as scrap metal, imagine an overcrowded subway car catching fire and hundreds of panicked spectators being trapped underground without any clue of an emergency exit. Wouldn't that be fantastic? As Mayor Daley saunters into Soldier Field holding the Olympic torch he stumbles, starts a fire and all the helplessly terrified spectators stampede to the exits only to find that they locked with chains or open inwards.

Or better yet, imagine what would happen to Chicago as the international tide of tourists subsides and the city is left with a giant swath of dormant buildings and sports arenas that were to be quickly bought up after the Olympics by savvy real-estate developers looking to pay top dollar for handfuls of tacky, slipshod buildings. But, most importantly, imagine these scenarios playing out publicly over that global audience Mayor Daley is so aggressively seeking.

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CHICAGO 2016

APPLICANT CITY

It shouldn't take long for most Chicago natives with the slightest knowledge of history, current events and Chicago's reputation for corruption and geographical segregation to realize that hosting the 2016 Olympics would be an awesome urban calamity with frighteningly serious economic consequences.

Both fortunately and unfortunately, it is 2009, which means that while the potential 2016 Olympics are nearly eight years away and local opposition to the games is already beginning to swell, initiating that all-important public dialog that will invariably lead Chicagoans to understand what is at stake is a proposition more easily said than executed.

Even though we're talking about an event that isn't set to take place for nearly another decade, time is of the essence and Chicago's actively-inclined have only until this October, when the International Olympic Committee chooses the 2016 host city, to make their dissenting voices heard.

As Chicago 2016, the nonprofit entity saddled with developing Chicago's bid, ratchets up its pro-construction, pro-development and pro-business rhetoric in the lead up to the IOC's April visit to Chicago to evaluate its bid, so too have Chicago's opposition. No Games Chicago, a group of civic, engaged and otherwise concerned citizens has emerged as Chicago 2016's earliest, organized and formidable opponents.

The group has begun holding public forums on the topic in the hopes that simple conversation (like that at the beginning of this piece) will lead citizens to understand the impending, albeit eight years down the road, magnitude of Chicago's 2016 Olympic Bid.

Most Chicagoans having paid casual attention to recent news stories about the city's bid might not yet grasp the significance of a global sporting event to be held years down the road.

But one simply has to listen to the warnings from other upcoming and former Olympic host cities like Vancouver B.C., Athens, Greece, Beijing, and London, to recognize that what we were being told right now by the corporate, business and political interests with a vested stake in having the games in Chicago is not unlike what was heard in these cities as well.

Because of cost overruns and a stagnant economy, Vancouver, a city whose taxpayers were also told they would be off the financial hook for costs incurred by the games, is now on the verge of go-

ing bankrupt—yes the actual city—and yes—bankrupt. Now numbers regarding the Olympics naturally are all over the place depending on the source, so to make it simple let's just look at the figures being floated by No Games Chicago, which may be a bit high, but nevertheless concerning. The estimated cost for Vancouver to host the 2010 winter games: \$600 million. The actual cost: \$2.5 billion. The estimated cost of the 2012 games in London: \$4.3 billion. The actual cost: \$16.6 billion. The point is clear and consistent, not even Olympic officials would argue that the estimated costs to host the games run according to plan. Chicago, which has already broken its promise to leave taxpayer money out by backing its bid with \$500 million "if necessary", estimates that it will cost \$2 billion to host the games. (Why don't you take a second and let that sink in)

There is also the issue of doling out the conservatively estimated \$2 billion in construction contracts to developers so that the infrastructure to sustain such an event can be built. Does anyone really believe that heinously corrupt Chicago politicians and insiders, in conjunction with the IOC, an unaccountable, secretive and often controversial entity will handle that task appropriately and in a fair and unbiased manner? Chicago 2016 is already attempting to silence public dissent according to a January 16 article, telling the IOC there is "no organized opposition," but merely groups that have "expressed concerns."

And money is just the most attractive tip of this complicated and nascent Olympic iceberg. There are not enough pages in this magazine or precious moments of your (the reader's) attention to fully impart the full breadth of reasons to oppose or at the very least call into question the idea of Chicago hosting the 2016 summer Olympics.

Assuming that Chicago does host the games and millions of taxpayer dollars are used to pay for and build a massive Olympic Village near McCormick Place, what then becomes of these buildings? Can the city really be relying on the real-estate industry to pull Chicago out of debt incurred by the Olympics? You bet your ass it is.

So if I still have you, I offer you this (as a rabid Chicago Cubs and sports fan myself): Who really gives a shit about sports? And more importantly, is it worth \$2 billion?

Perhaps a better question to ask a typical Chicagoan to gauge public opinion would be: What city service needs the most attention, the CTA, public health, police or the prison system? Take your pick.