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RACE FOR THE 2016 GAMES

At Chicago 2016 Olympics forums, truth is a high hurdle

Bid officials vault over hard truths at public meetings

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When Chicago 2016 organizers held a forum to address concerns about taxpayer exposure to the cost of the Games, they got a surprise result: People seemed more focused on jobs.

That's fine for now, the economy dire as it is. But it's best not to lose sight of money as Mayor Richard Daley and Olympics boosters put billions of taxpayer dollars potentially on the line in bidding for the 2016 Games.

Of course, Daley and his bid backers would prefer we not see it that way.

"There are no taxpayer dollars that have been spent on the Olympics," Lori Healey, president of the Chicago 2016 bid committee, told a crowd of about 150 people at an 11th Ward community forum Wednesday evening. "There's not any that have been spent for the bid and not any in the budget."

Healey is not so much misstating the truth as she is half-stating it.

The part she says is true. The bid is paid for. And the budget does balance nicely, as do most budgets that look far into the future.

The half Healey ducked -- the bigger half, by far -- is the part that exposes Chicago taxpayers to an unlimited financial loss should the 2016 Games go badly wrong.

Here's how Chicago works. Mayor Daley in Switzerland last month reverses prior public promises and commits taxpayers to cover losses for the 2016 Games. He tours Europe for nearly another week, yet the good people of Chicago are still upset when he returns home.

The mayor applies some Daley-speak -- in effect denying, between sputters at a news conference, that what he said in Switzerland really is true. But this fails to adequately cloud the issue.

The common people are still agitated, which is not good for the 2016 bid. So Daley dispatches Healey, his former chief of staff and new Chicago 2016 poohbah, to stage a series of public forums to ask



taxpayers how they feel.

And Chicagoans, at an evening forum in the McKinley Park field house in Bridgeport, react as Chicagoans do. Not all obsess about bloated budgets and broken promises. Nah. What they want is an answer to that old Chicago refrain: Where's mine?

A carpet layer wants to make certain he won't get locked out of McCormick Place, where the weight-lifting venue must surely need carpet. A pushcart vendor wants to sell frozen snacks.

A young girl, wearing glasses and a free "Back the Bid" T-shirt handed out by Chicago 2016 officials, leans into the microphone to ask if she might by chance see sports celebrities, such as swimmer Michael Phelps. A Games official assures her that, indeed, sports stars will come to the 2016 Olympic Games.

As Healey tap dances around a question about construction costs, a woman next to me makes notes on the "Back the Bid" poster she was handed when she entered. "She's not answering," one note says.

The series of forums, which will resume Monday, are campaign appearances, not public hearings. Chicago 2016 is staging them carefully -- busing in youthful supporters, having a public relations official read written questions and even editing out the tough ones, according to people who complained afterward.

As in a political campaign, Chicago 2016 officials are carefully massaging the truth. When one person asked about the cost of insurance for the Games -- the clear reference was to two policies worth a total of \$1 billion Chicago 2016 has said it will obtain to protect taxpayers against financial losses -- Healey said the premium would cost only \$41 million.

Only afterward, answering questions from reporters, did Healey acknowledge that \$41 million is the amount budgeted for standard insurance needed to stage the Games. Healey would not estimate the cost of the additional \$1 billion worth of taxpayer-protection coverage.

The irony of the process is that Chicago 2016 has a product worth selling. If run well, the Olympics could more than justify the potential cost. In the debate over Daley's plan to sign the contract, the potential financial exposure may have been overblown.

The purpose of the public meetings should be to clear the air, not cloud it. At the first one, Chicago 2016 left an impression that the whole truth about the costs of staging the 2016 Games is something that they fear.

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