

POLITICS AS USUAL: Mortgaging the Future

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Despite my initial skepticism, I have to admit I enjoyed the Pan Am games and am looking forward to the Parapan Am games, which start this week.

I wasn't going to attend any of the events, but I ended up at the Pan Am village in Toronto to watch the beach volleyball. ?Wow,? is all I have to say.

The venues are - in a word - fantastic. The volunteers and staff are helpful and enthusiastic. The crowds are large and exuberant and, of course, the athletic performances are simply not to be missed. From start to finish, it was a great experience.

Yes, there were some pretty big drawbacks ? not least of which, of course, is the price tag. The actual dollars and cents that it took to put on the games will not be known for a while, but it is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions.

Traffic was a headache for many, but not for me. I take public transit or my bike virtually everywhere so I did not experience the extra-long commutes that plagued so many.

And, of course, the ticket prices to the actual events were costly too: Eighty bucks to watch the rowing finals? 50 Bucks to watch the swimming preliminaries? That's a lot of money for tickets to events that we, as taxpayers, paid for. The average family would be hard pressed to afford one ticketed event let alone multiple.

But, to offset that, there were many, many events which were free: the Panamania events were wonderful. Live music, fireworks ? something for everyone every night.

All in all, it sounds pretty wonderful and, because of the ?success? of the games, folks are now clamoring for Toronto to put in yet another bid to be a host site for the big show ? the Olympics. It will be Toronto's fifth attempt.

This is where my enthusiasm for the games stops.

There is no way that Toronto should attempt to host an Olympics. For starters, they wouldn't even be the host! The GTA would be the host ? as GTA is the host for the Pan Am games. At least half the Pan Am venues are not in Toronto. They are in Milton, Caledon, Markham, Welland, St. Catherines ? so how exactly is Toronto hosting the PANAM games?

It is not Toronto's decision. It is a GTA decision and yet the GTA municipalities ? and their taxpayers ?don't seem to have any say in the matter.

Was the Mayor of Toronto elected on a platform of bringing the Olympics ? and all the costs and headaches associated with it ? to the GTA? I don't recall that matter coming up during the marathon months of the election. And similarly, as he is musing about putting in another bid, I don't recall any emergency meeting of his fellow Council members, let alone GTA leaders, to discuss the merits of doing so.

Why the focus on Mayor Tory?

I am not clear how it is his decision alone ? a decision that will have an impact on literally millions of people and dozens of municipalities. Just to sign the Letter of Intent will cost a million bucks. To put in a full bid costs 50 to 60 million bucks. Given that price tag and the fact that they have failed four times already, that means that Toronto has already spent upwards of \$200 million or so on trying to get the Olympics.

Before we go down that road again, shouldn't the folks directly affected ? that would be you and I? you know, the taxpayers ? have some say in whether we want to take on this huge financial burden?

I am not some couch potato curmudgeon. I have been involved in sports virtually all of my life. I would love to be directly involved in the Olympics ? to witness an Olympic rowing final would be an experience of a lifetime. But that doesn't mean I want my tax dollars to go towards bringing them here. I have no right to force future generations to pay for white elephants.

Regardless of the shiny happy messages, that is what will happen. Will there be legacy effects from the investment in infrastructure and venues? Absolutely. Case in point, as a result of hosting the Pan Am rowing events, significant investments were made to the Henley course in St Catherines.

The bridge to Henley Island has finally been fixed. That is a \$750,000 investment that is well worth it. Residents and rowers alike can now drive over the bridge without crossing their fingers in hopes that it doesn't collapse.

But other improvements such a new timing system, fibre optic communications, FISA standard buoy system ? these are great for rowers ? but do nothing for the average resident of St. Catherines.

And that's my point: who benefits from this massive amount of taxpayers' largesse? Not the average Joe, that's for sure. Who will get tickets to these games? Who will get to use the facilities after the Olympics are done? More than likely, it won't be you and I.

By all accounts, we are heading into a recession. In the coming months, municipal leaders will be forced to make difficult decisions about how to spend dwindling tax dollars.

We have roads that are falling apart, infrastructure that is beyond repair. We have literally thousands of people on a waiting list in the hopes of finding affordable housing. We have food banks that run out of food. Think about that. There are thousands of people right now who have nowhere to live and nothing to eat.

Sorry, but how can you possibly contemplate spending billions of dollars on a two week event when you have so many other actual priorities. We can look down our nose at Rio Games amidst all that poverty. But really, would we be any different? It's just a difference in scale.

And I have raised this issue before in a previous column, but why are additional sites being sought at all? There are fantastic facilities already built; world class facilities gathering dust. Why build more?

That makes no sense ? financially or, frankly, morally.

The responsible decision is to give residents a future, not mortgage it. Bread not circuses indeed.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is ? after all ? Our Town.

Brock's Banter returns next week.