

# **PUBLIC PECEPTIONS OF MAJOR SPORT EVENT IMPACTS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sporting events are perceived to have the potential to generate a substantial number of benefits within host communities. Such benefits include economic (i.e. increase in tourism activity and number of jobs, infrastructure investment) and social (i.e. community identity, social capital, social cohesion). These perceived benefits have encouraged governments worldwide to subsidise events, construct sport stadiums, and engage in highly competitive bidding processes for sports events. However, Gratton, Shibli and Coleman (2005) suggested that the economic [and social] benefits accruing to the local community from sport events have been poorly researched. This argument implies that while event organisers are quick to use assumed potential benefits to justify major events and the associated expenditure, they seem less concerned with determining the actual outcomes and measuring the potential debt they sometimes assign to future generations.

Public choice theory suggests that politicians act “economically” by pursuing self-interests related to their political fortunes (see (Leeds, M. & von Allmen, 2005). Such political fortunes are generally linked to highly organized interest groups that have well-defined goals, access to political power and the skills to advocate their agendas. It is thus likely that the public is largely ignored in the political processes leading to decisions about bidding for events and related decisions concerning infrastructure needs required for bids to succeed (Gratton, et al, 2005). At best it seems that governments and peak administrative bodies for sport assume high levels of public support for these actions. This paper examines the public's level of perceived agreement about a range of potential outcomes from and infrastructure needed for, major sport events.

## **METHODS**

Data were collected by means of a self-administered survey utilising a convenience sample of 281 university students majoring in tourism, leisure, sport, or hotel management at Griffith University, Australia. The survey instrument was developed based on an extensive literature review (e.g., Fredline, 2000; Turco, 1998; Soutar & McLeod, 1993), and was designed to elicit data on perceptions of the nature and extent of benefits and costs associated with major sport events, respondents' demographics and their level of sporting involvement. For the main dependent variables respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a series of 35 items related to the benefits and costs that may result from major sports events. Responses to these items were scored on a seven point Likert scale, with possible responses ranging from ‘1=strongly disagree’ to ‘7=strongly agree’. Data were analysed by SPSS using mainly correlation and ANOVA.

## **RESULTS**

The results indicated that respondents recorded moderately high levels of agreement about the potential economic and social benefits resulting from the hosting of major sport events especially in such areas as economic contributions to the local region and the enhancement of city identity and image. However, respondents also recorded moderately high levels of agreement about the propensity of negative externalities to be associated with the conduct of major sport events. These included traffic congestion, crowding and pollution. Furthermore, the results indicated relatively high levels of agreement about supporting investment by government in the infrastructure necessary to successfully bid for, and subsequently conduct, major sport events. This was particularly evident in relation to providing appropriate transportation and telecommunication networks, renovating existing stadiums and direct government investment to underwrite the operating costs

of the event. These results were moderated somewhat by respondents' level of sporting engagement (e.g., participation levels, hours spent watching sport and number of sport events attended).

## **DISCUSSION**

Although there is widespread agreement about the need for community participation in the planning process (Cuthill, 2001; 2002), in the case of decisions concerning major sport events and associated infrastructure, it seems this rarely occurs in Australia (apart from somewhat superficial efforts). Therefore, many such decisions appear to be made on the basis of assumed need (Glyptis, 1989). While this approach is frequently criticised, the results of this study provide support for such a strategy on the part of government and event planners. Furthermore, the results indicate that there is some basis for the assumption of positive public perceptions about the benefits derived from major sport events and also imply that governments are likely to continue to feel little pressure to fully consult with the public on event bidding and sport stadia development issues. Therefore, it seems that the results reinforce the rational actor view which suggests that the benefits of the political process tend to accrue to politically powerful interest groups while the costs of providing these benefits will be dispersed over those without political power and those who also have less ability to pay such costs (Leeds, M. & von Allmen, 2005).

However, the question arises as to the basis on which the public reaches its conclusions about potential economic and social benefits arising from major sport events. It is argued that the public is largely informed on the basis of media reports which tend to reflect the information supplied by event organisers and relevant government agencies. However, the literature strongly suggests that actually realising event benefits, especially economic benefits, is problematic (see Baade, 2000, Crompton, 2004). The implications of this for government policy, event organisers and the community will be discussed.

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