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The case for Calgary as host of the 2026 Olympic Games

By Vicki Hall

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CALGARY – One of Canada's biggest sports stories of 2017 is set to unfold not on ice or grass but in council chambers at Calgary City Hall.

Come late summer, Calgary's elected officials are expected to vote on whether the city should bid for the 2026 Olympics in hopes of recreating the magic of the 1988 Winter Games.

A 17-member committee - chaired by former police chief Rick Hanson and including Olympic champions Beckie Scott and Catriona Le May Doan - is exploring the feasibility of a bid. The findings of the \$5-million study are due in July.

On the surface, a bid may seem preposterous given the US\$55-billion budget of the 2014 Sochi Games (!) and the recession-battered economy in Alberta. In the wake of sagging oil prices, Calgary has the highest unemployment rate of any major city in Canada at 10.2 per cent.

Regardless, the prevailing winds point to Calgary officially throwing the proverbial cowboy hat in the ring this fall – pending final approval by the Canadian Olympic Committee.

Here are eight reasons why Calgarians will go for it:

1. The economy: Yes, it's true. Calgary is reeling. Oil plunged from more than US\$100 a barrel in 2014 to less than \$30 in 2016 before shakily climbing back above \$50 before Christmas. Housing prices are down, vacancy rates are up, small businesses are shuttering. The carnage is real. But Alberta experienced a similar downturn in the early 1980s when the city decided to bid for the 1988 Winter Games. Could the Olympics help Alberta rise from latest bust? "Considering the status of our economy right now, it would have a very powerful impact on the city and the province," says Doug Mitchell, founder of Calgary's Sport Tourism Authority. "When you consider infrastructure and creation of jobs, I think it could be a very important part of the province's growth or recovery from the current situation." The Sports Tourism Authority forecasts the creation or support of 40,000 jobs through Calgary 2026.

2. Olympic Agenda 2020: Yes, the Sochi Olympic budget is enough to make any country run as fast as Usain Bolt -

or Andre De Grasse - away from the proposition. But the International Olympic Committee is vowing change under a series of reforms designed to slash the cost of bidding and encourage host cities to "reduce, reuse and recycle." That philosophy suits Calgary considering the majority of the 1988 facilities are still operational, including the Olympic Oval, Winsport's Canada Olympic Park and the nearby Canmore Nordic Centre. Upgrades are needed – especially to the aging bobsleigh track – but the cost is minimal compared to starting anew. "There's a lot of stuff that Calgary can do that will be very efficient," says John Furlong, chair of a special COC committee struck to help Calgary explore a possible bid for 2026. "But others will do this too. You try to use what you have."

3. International sentiment: The IOC desperately needs a safe harbour – a city or country that can comfortably pull off an Olympic Games without calamity. After all, the entire Olympic movement is in turmoil in the wake of the doping scandal in Sochi and the financial woes in Rio, and faces the spectre of three consecutive Games in Asia (Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020 and snow-starved Beijing in 2022). "No one has ever really said anything bad about Calgary," Around the Rings editor Ed Hula says from the online publication's head office in Atlanta. "It's got a solid reputation as far as a past host of the Olympic Games. It's got everything going for it." Calgary is widely credited for reinventing the Winter Games thanks in part to a record \$309-million American television rights deal.

4. Local sentiment: Calgary fancies itself as an international mecca for elite winter sport. And for good reason. Olympians from around the world flock here to train and compete at the 1988 facilities. The ski jumps tower over the skyline and the Rocky Mountains loom large to the west. To long-time Calgarians over 40, the '88 Games are seen as 16 days that forever changed the city. "The world had arrived on our doorstep - and Calgary was suddenly moving out of its role as a regional hinterland," University of Calgary sociologist Harry Hiller told Postmedia in 2013. "It would no longer be a Cowtown, an agricultural base. It would undergo a major transformation." Nearly 30 years after that transformation, the warm fuzzies persist – especially for members of the 10,000-strong volunteer army that helped make the event a success. "I've lived in Toronto and Vancouver," says Mitchell, a lawyer and former commissioner of the Canadian Football League. "They're great cities, but the volunteer aspect is not just the same as it is in Calgary and Alberta. It's amazing."

5. Chances of winning: Switzerland is seriously considering a bid, and there's noise surrounding the possibility in Austria, Germany and Norway. But the vast majority of Olympic journalists and officials polled informally at the world press briefing for the 2018 Pyeongchang Games in November said they believed Calgary would win the 2026 Games if it submitted a bid. The chances grow higher if Paris or Budapest beat out Los Angeles in the race for the 2024 Summer Olympics (a final decision is expected on Sept. 13). "I think it would probably be better for Calgary if one of the European cities got the 2024 Games," Hula says. "It would certainly put North America's number up for 2026." Given the Los Angeles bid, the United States Olympic Committee is not expected to put forward a winter bid this time around – putting Calgary in prime position.

6. Donald Trump: Calgary's prospects brightened considerably the night Trump claimed the American presidency. The IOC voting process is political in the extreme – and members might make a statement on Trump's policies this September by giving Paris or Budapest the nod. (Paris is already a likely choice for some if they go purely on where they would like to spend three weeks of their lives in the summer.) Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti told the Associated Press in August that IOC members "would say, 'Wait a second, can we go to a country like that where we've heard things we take offence to?'" But Trump is a wildcard as his abilities as a salesman are perhaps unparalleled. He convinced the American people to vote for him. Don't rule out him doing the same with the IOC.

7. Ancillary needs: With the Olympics comes government investment in infrastructure, and Calgary has some big-ticket items on the wish list. Chief among them is a new arena to replace the Saddledome, the oldest rink in the National Hockey League, and a light-rail transit line to connect the airport with downtown. (At present, the proposed hybrid arena-stadium-field house complex in the West Village is on hold while the city holds discussions with the Calgary Sports and Entertainment Corp. about building a replacement for the Saddledome in the vicinity of the Calgary Stampede grounds.) Affordable housing is another glaring need In Calgary, like most major Canadian cities. The athletes' village – and perhaps a media village – could turn into rental or condo units at the conclusion of the Games.

8. Naheed Nenshi: The Calgary mayor took a personal holiday to Rio for the 2016 Summer Games. He's a regular

presence at the Oval and Canada Olympic Park. There's no question Nenshi is a huge Olympic fan, and, if the numbers make sense, the popular politician is expected to lead the charge for Calgary in 2026.

But don't go booking hotel rooms just yet. Here are two reasons for pause:

1. Security costs in an unstable world: The 2010 Vancouver Organizing Committee declared that it broke even with total revenue and expenses just shy of \$1.9 billion. But the costs of security are not included in that calculation. Estimates suggest the Canadian taxpayer paid \$900 million to secure the Games in Vancouver and Whistler. University of Alberta sociology professor Dominique Clement warns that number could climb much higher come 2026 – especially if a major terrorist attack occurs in the lead-up to the opening ceremonies. "One of the tricky things about bidding for an Olympics is that it's a long process – almost a decade long – and you cannot predict what's going to happen," Clement says. "Security costs can skyrocket if there's a major event that happens right before it. And the world is so interconnected now that it doesn't really matter if the event happens in China or Europe or South America or right here in our backyard."

2. Political support: According to Hula, Olympic bids almost always live or die based on the backing of the public and respective governments. Indeed, Calgary cannot go this alone. Federal and provincial funding are essential. "I look forward to hearing very much of Mayor Nenshi's engagements and consultations with the citizens of Calgary, with the province of Alberta," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters last month. "We're always open to opportunities to showcase how extraordinary Calgary is, how extraordinary Canada is, to the world and we look forward to continuing to hear about proposals like this." Provincially, Premier Rachel Notley's government is pegged to run a \$10.8-billion deficit in 2017. The NDP might look more favourably on the proposal if Edmonton – which originally hoped to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games – also hosted some Olympic events to share the benefit with more Albertans. "Think of the Olympics as an expensive piece of jewelry or a very expensive sports car," Clement says. "It's nice to have. It's enjoyable while you're using it. It's something to take pride in. But it's not something you need."

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