

Denver Can and Should Pursue Winter Olympics, Committee Says

Michael Roberts

To the surprise of absolutely no one, the Winter Games Exploratory Committee has announced that Denver and Colorado can and should pursue bids for future Olympic and Paralympic events. However, the concept calls for an approach that wouldn't require direct funding from taxpayers and recommends that any efforts in regard to 2020 and beyond be submitted to a statewide vote in advance.

These components are unlikely to placate [NOlympics, a group opposed to Colorado pursuing the Winter Games in 2030](#) that staged a demonstration at the State Capitol in March. Among the speakers was former Governor and NOlympics co-chair Dick Lamm, a central figure in the movement that pulled the plug on the state playing host to the spectacle more than forty years ago.

On May 14, 1970, an exultant delegation of civic-minded business leaders and politicians returned to Denver from an IOC meeting in Amsterdam with the bid for the '76 games firmly in hand. "This is the icing on the cake of our Colorado centennial celebration," declared Mayor Bill McNichols.

And then, over the course of two tumultuous years, the dream unraveled. Much to the delegation's bewilderment, many people in Colorado believed that hosting the Olympics would indeed bring the state to the brink — not of greatness, but of disaster. They complained about environmental impacts and the threat of runaway growth, a price tag that seemed to double every few months and a lack of community input in the entire process. It didn't help that many of the claims made by the Denver Olympic Committee in order to secure the games — assertions about facilities and housing already in place, ideal alpine and Nordic sites within an easy drive of Denver, ample snow and the like — turned out to be a mix of wishful thinking, artful fudging, reckless exaggeration and pure fantasy.

Led by an obscure 34-year-old state representative named Richard Douglas Lamm, a core of young but politically savvy opponents launched a campaign to stop the project in its tracks. Dismissed as interlopers and "street people," they managed to put the question of whether to spend public money on the Winter Games on a statewide ballot, as well as a separate initiative in Denver itself. In 1972, Denver became the only city in history to be awarded the Olympics and then spurn them. The turnabout signaled a profound upheaval in Colorado's power structure, one that would propel Dick Lamm into the Governor's Mansion for three terms and forever alter the state's political chemistry.



NOlympics protesters at the State Capitol in March gathered beneath a portrait of the group's co-chair, former governor Dick Lamm.

File photo

Despite this epic rejection, various groups have flirted with the idea of romancing the Olympics again. In 2012, for instance, what was dubbed the Denver Olympic Exploratory Committee released a report in which members "unanimously recommended that Governor John Hickenlooper and Mayor Michael Hancock [pursue getting the 2022 Games](#)," reporter Sam Levin wrote at the time.

This plan came to naught shortly thereafter, when the United States Olympics Committee [decided against bidding for the 2022 Olympics](#). But late last year, the notion rose to the fore again, with Denver Mayor Michael Hancock being among its most enthusiastic proponents.

"The Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games present the opportunity for our community to evaluate the economic and social costs and benefits of bringing world-class athletes from around the world to our city, region and state in the spirit of competition, friendship and fair play," Hancock was quoted as saying. "Colorado is already a world-class destination for winter sports. This exploratory committee will determine if it is in Denver's and the state's best interests to pursue a bid, and whether there is strong community-based support for the effort."

This boosterism suggested strongly that a pro-Olympics recommendation would be coming down the pike eventually, and it's now arrived. Here's the announcement.



Business and political leaders, including Colorado Lieutenant Governor John Vanderhoof (third from left), Governor John Love (second from right) and Denver Mayor Tom Currigan (far right) worked for years on a successful bid to host the '76 Winter Olympics.

Denver Public Library

Governor and Mayor Accept Exploratory Committee Recommendations for Denver and Colorado to Pursue Bid for a Future Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games Using New Approach

Recommendations inspired by statewide community input and International Olympic Committee's Agenda 2020 and The New Norm

The Winter Games Exploratory Committee recommends that Denver and Colorado pursue hosting a future Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games if the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) calls for U.S. bid cities, and Mayor Michael B. Hancock and Governor John Hickenlooper have accepted the recommendation. The Exploratory Committee evaluated countless data points, including more than 30,000 interactions with Coloradans across the state, while closely studying the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Agenda 2020 and The New Norm, which reform how the Olympic Games are delivered.

Based on Mayor Hancock's original directive, supported by feedback garnered throughout the exploratory process, the Committee is recommending a new model that would allow Denver and Colorado to host the Games without any direct funding from taxpayers. The Exploratory Committee also recommends that any future bid effort only go forward if endorsed by a statewide vote of Coloradans in 2020 or beyond. The Winter Games would be a statewide event, with major competition venues outside of Denver and athletes and spectators from all over the state participating; therefore, a statewide referendum would empower the voters of Colorado to decide.

"The IOC's Agenda 2020 and The New Norm embody a new philosophy that supports host cities and their economic, social and environmental long-term planning needs in order to host

successful Olympic Games," explained Robert Cohen, chair of the Exploratory Committee and chairman and CEO of The IMA Financial Group. "Inspired by that new philosophy, Denver and Colorado's Exploratory Committee developed a new financial model that would enable a future organizing committee to host the Games without requiring direct funding from any public entity or the taxpayers, nor would it rely upon government guarantees."

The Exploratory Committee's report demonstrates that Denver and Colorado's mountain communities are more than capable of hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, and that there is statewide support for hosting the Games. At the same time, the Committee recognizes the concerns raised in Colorado communities regarding challenges faced in the areas of affordable housing, transportation, mobility and sustainability. While an Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games cannot solve such shared priorities for the city and state, the Games could be a catalyst to speed up solutions that may be planned or under consideration. For instance, previous North American host cities, such as Salt Lake City and Vancouver, benefited from improvements to their roads to and from their mountain communities.

The Exploratory Committee's work was composed of a robust process that included input from communities throughout the state via the Sharing the Gold advisories in Metro Denver and in mountain communities, online community meetings, a speakers bureau, an online survey, a statistically significant poll and a website.

Mayor Hancock, who, along with Governor Hickenlooper, charged the committee with this work said, "By combining the International Olympic Committee's new approach to hosting the Games with the recommendations to relieve the financial burden on taxpayers and place the ultimate decision-making with Colorado residents, I feel we have the right approach to host the Games the Colorado way." Mayor Hancock added, "I am grateful for the Exploratory Committee's guidance for moving forward as a community. Through their engagement with residents, they not only determined what the support was for hosting a future Winter Games, but also how these events could serve as a catalyst to help solve challenging issues statewide, including growing traffic congestion and the housing crisis."

The report by the Exploratory Committee details how Denver and Colorado could host a future Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games and includes a comprehensive plan that would allow the Games to be executed within the organizing committee's budget and without direct funding from any public entity or the taxpayers, nor would it require state or local taxpayers to be financially responsible for any potential losses associated with the Games. The ability to showcase Colorado to audiences worldwide would have significant, long-term economic benefits to Denver and Colorado.

"A statewide referendum gives Coloradans the chance to weigh in on the potential to host a Winter Games," said Governor John Hickenlooper. "We handle crowds much greater than the typical Winter Games attendance without significant congestion or other impacts to the state. This report shows how a Winter Games could provide long term economic, social and environmental benefits."

The USOC has publicly stated it is focused on pursuing a 2030 bid or beyond. Based on historic timing, the 2030 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games will be awarded in 2023 with the official bid dialogue phase beginning in 2021. The USOC is the sole entity that will determine whether to submit a bid for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, and it can only submit one bid on behalf of the United States to the IOC.