

L.A. likes its chances of hosting 2016 Olympic Games

by Dan Laidman

LOS ANGELES - Competing in the Olympics is a milestone for any athlete, but for Willie Banks, the 1984 festival was especially sweet. The Los Angeles games were just up the coast from Oceanside, where the track and field champion grew up.

"My family was there, my friends were there, it was spectacular," said Banks, who now lives in Carlsbad. "It was a pinnacle moment for me, and I hope I can re-create some of that emotion, not just for me, but for young people who are coming up now."

To that end, Banks has been an active supporter of Los Angeles' bid to host the 2016 Olympics, an event that would spill into communities around the region, including San Diego. Los Angeles' official proposal includes plans for soccer matches at Qualcomm Stadium.

On April 14, officials here will learn if the city is the nation's nominee to host the international games. As one of two finalists for the coveted nomination, the city can point to its successful 1984 Olympics, while the other city still in the running, Chicago, would be a first-time host.

For backers of the Los Angeles bid, experience is seen as both the biggest challenge and the most significant selling point.

"It always comes up, that's the most important question. ... L.A.'s had it twice, why give it to them three times?" said Banks, who now works as a sports marketing consultant specializing in the Olympics. "The statement (should be), 'Why shouldn't we give it to L.A., since they did such a great job last time and they have such a great thing to offer this time?'"

The 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles not only avoided public subsidies but turned a \$235 million profit that

went toward youth sports programs. The paralyzing traffic jams and rowdy crowds that some had predicted never materialized, surprising droves of Angelenos who skipped town for the two-week-long event.

Holding Olympic contests that year at various venues around the region - including equestrian events in Rancho Santa Fe - may have helped avoid a traffic crunch.

Warm memories of those festivities have created a dramatically different climate in Los Angeles as the city bids for the 2016 games. The Southern California Committee for the Olympic Games has released a poll showing 89 percent of Angelenos are in favor of the bid, and touts an economic forecast suggesting that attendance, sponsorship programs, transportation and tourism related to the games could bring \$7 billion to the region.

Whereas the 1984 games stimulated growth in Los Angeles, backers say the 2016 games would benefit from decades of ongoing infrastructure development. The committee has carefully crafted the bid to make use of - even spotlight - new facilities, from the L.A. Live entertainment complex sprouting up downtown to the expanding light-rail network.

"In 1984 we didn't have one inch of commuter rail, (and) now we've got a couple hundred miles, and 94 percent of the tickets we have for sale will be accessible by rail," said Barry Sanders, chairman of the Southern California Olympic committee. "We've selected for that purpose."

Sanders, a corporate lawyer and civic leader, declined to compare Los Angeles' bid to Chicago's, but said one of Southern California's strengths is its wealth of existing venues.

"The wild card in Olympic budgeting is construction," he said. "Without construction as a significant part of our budget it means that our numbers are very reliable, and our numbers do indicate there would be a surplus at the end."

The Southern California committee expects the games to be entirely privately funded. However, like Chicago, it won a government funding guarantee of several hundred million dollars as a backup if the Olympics lose money.

The California Assembly voted 65-1 late last month to approve a \$250 million state financial guarantee, with the only dissent coming from Assemblymember Todd Spitzer, R-Orange.

"I think it's very hypocritical to represent to the International Olympic Committee that L.A. would be a good site for the Olympics," Spitzer said. "I think it probably would be, but for the fact it's one of the unsafest cities in the nation. It's got an out-of-control gang problem, and the mayor and the police chief are silent on the issue of prison overcrowding."

Spitzer, a former Orange County prosecutor and reserve Los Angeles police officer, said he fears that crowded prisons will lead to more criminals being released onto the streets by 2016, and that a major event like the Olympics could be a distraction for law enforcement.

Los Angeles officials discount such concerns, noting that they have a plan to expand the LAPD in the coming years. While officials have noted a rise in street gang activity, they contend that serious crime has dropped in Los Angeles for four straight years, and that the FBI ranks it as the nation's second-safest large city, just ahead of San Diego.

Sanders thinks that Los Angeles will be an attractive destination for Olympians and throngs of tourists. The bid must include a cultural component, and the committee has crafted an ambitious plan called "Peak Performance" that would include events all across California.

"It will show the analogy between great athletic performance and great performance in anything," Sanders

said. "We had a wonderful cultural program in 1984, but it wasn't as far-flung geographically, and it wasn't as diverse in terms of culture that's not considered elite culture."

Sanders suggested that the cultural program could make use of San Diego resources such as the Old Globe Theater, among others.

Once the United States Olympic Committee makes its decision, the nominee will face a field of international competitors that is expected to include Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro and Prague, among many other cities. The International Olympic Committee will choose the winner in October 2009.

When the U.S. committee toured Los Angeles recently, Banks met with some of the representatives to give a former Olympian's take on the bid. He stressed the attractions of the entire area, including his home county of San Diego.

"That's one of the great things about this bid," he said. "Everyone is going to be affected in this Southern California region."

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