

DISPATCH: 2010 OLYMPICS

How hope for a soaring future taught Whistler's mayor to love the Games

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WHISTLER -- If there is one thing a politician gains from hosting an Olympic Games in his or her backyard, it is a finely tuned sense of compromise.

Ken Melamed, the mayor of the Resort Municipality of Whistler, is no exception. As a councillor, he was the only representative who voted against having the 2010 Winter Games at the resort in 2002. In an interview this week, he recalled how his perspective shifted.

"At the time, I thought it would provide some significant stress on the community. And it has done that," he said. "But it has also provided many of the opportunities and benefits that the pro camp was suggesting. This whole thing has been about the art of compromise."

The 54-year-old former stone mason moved to Whistler in 1976, when there were just 500 permanent residents. He lived in a trailer at the bottom of Whistler Creekside for two years, working as a lift operator. He has seen the resort grow into one of the best known in the world, and has contributed more than a few stone walls to its construction.

Print Edition - Section Front



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First elected to council in 1996 after serving for six years as the president of a local grassroots environmental organization, Mr. Melamed said he realized that the best way to steer the 2010 Olympic juggernaut along a greener road was from the driver's seat.

He ran for mayor in November of 2005 against three other candidates, including formidable ex-mayor and former B.C. MLA Ted Neibling, and won by 353 votes.

During the campaign, Mr. Melamed managed to shake his image of having a record of NIMBYism over development proposals. Another candidate in the race called him "an extreme left-wing environmentalist who claims he is a 'changed man.'"

Rhetoric aside, the key to Mr. Melamed's evolution, almost three years on, can be found in his wholehearted promotion of sustainability, a word that frequently finds its way into his sentences.

As a councillor, he was a founding director of Smart Growth B.C. - a non-governmental organization devoted to fiscally, socially and environmentally responsible land use - in 1999. By 2000 he and his council colleagues had embraced becoming the municipality becoming the first in North America to adopt The Natural Step, a framework promoted by a Swedish not-for-profit organization that aims to bring together community and business leaders by integrating social, environmental and economic decision making.

Mr. Melamed said that while Whistler initially made the biggest noise about turning 2010 into the most environmentally sustainable Games, the Vancouver Organizing Committee and the International Olympic Committee have climbed on board wholeheartedly.

This agreement, said Mr. Melamed, has manifested itself in many ways, but all with a long-term aim of helping the town grow in a sustainable way.

For example, the Athletes' Village, which will house about 2,400 athletes and officials, is being built to LEED Neighbourhood Development design standards. That is a rigorous checklist of 10 areas that must be sustainable in construction and maintenance, including using less water and energy; using cleaner, renewable construction materials; and incorporating recycling plans.

With the homes created there to be returned to the community in the form of badly needed employee housing, even the layout of the development is important, with central areas for buses and paths for cyclists being emphasized over vehicle use.

Other Olympic-inspired projects that fit into Whistler council's sustainability aims include the new cross-country ski track at the Callaghan Valley Nordic Centre, which has a tiny footprint compared with similar Olympic facilities of the past.

That is important, said Mr. Melamed, in an area that had previously been undeveloped and remains home to much wildlife, including grizzly bears.

No detail was too small to ignore in the resort's bid for sustainability, he added, including the remodelling of the waste-water treatment plant and even the composting of vegetation cleared from various Olympic sites.

"Everything we have done is something that will accommodate and enhance the Games, but also positions us well for the future."

Mr. Melamed, who was born in Philadelphia and moved to Canada when he was 13, is an energetic married father of two who goes out with ski patrols on Fridays. He recently declared his intention to run for a second mayoral term this fall. Asked whether he has any ambition to run for higher office in the future, he would not commit.

"It's fun to speculate about what that might be. I really like local government and find it the closest to people, and you can make meaningful change on the ground. Sometimes you get lost up in the other levels of government."

Quick biography

Born in Philadelphia

Family moved to Montreal in 1966

Majored in science at Dawson College, Montreal

Moved to Jasper in 1973, then to Whistler in 1976, working as a lift operator Became a ski patroller in 1977

In 1988, founded his own company, Ken Melamed Stoneworks

Elected to council in 1996

In 1999, named founding director of Smart Growth B.C., a group dedicated to fiscally, socially and environmentally responsible land use.

Elected mayor in 2005

As mayor, runs a town with a population of approximately 9,500

Has made priorities of implementing Whistler's part in the 2010 Games, and overseeing the town's long-term sustainability plan, called Whistler 2020

Married with two sons

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