

Records for 2010 Olympic Games go missing

By Stanley Tromp, *The Georgia Straight*

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Two key sources of information about the finances and management of the 2010 Olympic Games have been abruptly cut off.

Minutes are no longer being recorded of the meetings of the B.C. 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games Secretariat (the B.C. Secretariat), a branch of the provincial Economic Development Ministry, which manages the Games.

As well, until now the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (Vanoc) would forward copies of its meeting minutes to the same ministry in Victoria, but now the ministry says it cannot find such records any more.

The Georgia Straight had twice obtained hundred of pages of minutes from both entities through quarterly requests under the B.C. Freedom of Information Act. Upon the third similar request, the then-FOI director of the ministry, Darlene Kotchonoski, replied in February: "We have not located any records in response to your request."

Kotchonoski later explained that she had been told by the secretariat that it had decided to stop recording minutes of its meetings, without explanation. In addition, she added, because the ministry can no longer locate any minutes of Vanoc meetings, those records cannot be obtained either. (Although Vanoc is not covered by the FOI law, the copies of its records it had sent to the ministry had been accessible because the ministry itself is covered by the law.)

The B.C. information commissioner's office is investigating the loss of FOI access to the minutes.

At Vanoc's office, which is located on another floor of the same Graveley Street building as the secretariat, spokesperson Chris Brumwell was unable to explain if meeting minutes were still being kept or sent to the ministry.

"Vanoc's meetings are understandably considered internal," he said, but added: "We do report out on our board meetings, provide agendas, and have press conferences after each one, which the media is welcome to come to." Calls and e-mails to secretariat president Annette Antoniak were not returned.

When the minutes were received, it often took five months to obtain them, and many sections were blanked out, yet what remained still gave insight into the Games' planning.

For example, at a secretariat meeting of August 28, 2007, the minutes say: "A team reviewed Vanoc's risk management to ensure the process is working and that they identify risk exposures. The process is effective, however they need to improve on how they identify risks."

At a Vanoc finance-committee meeting of March 12, 2007, chaired by Ken Dobell, the record notes that when the Hillcrest Curling Venue amending agreement was discussed, three officials left the room to avoid a potential "conflict of interest".

Maureen Bader, spokesperson for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, laughed when told the secretariat had stopped keeping minutes. "Why did that become secret?" she asked. "All those minutes should be posted on Web sites, like city councils do. The Games will cost us billions of dollars, and there has to be full accountability for that money."

The loss of FOI access to the minutes is "reprehensible", the B.C. NDP Olympic Games critic, MLA Harry Bains, told the Straight. "It's like pulling teeth trying. This secrecy is absolutely unacceptable. This is \$2.5 billion of taxpayers' money. It's also paramount to the success of an organization to keep minutes so that [we] can review the past history of decision-making, and improve it in the future."

Bains said Vanoc should be covered by the FOI law, the meetings should be open to the public, and the B.C. auditor general should be the ongoing Olympics auditor of record.

The situation highlights a broader issue. Canadian information commissioners have often spoken out against a growing trend toward “oral government”, whereby records are not created or preserved, a process that prevents information release under FOI. They lament that it leads to poor governance and management of the public interest, as corporate history is lost. They also call for new laws to compel agencies to create and preserve records of their important decisions and actions.