Mega-projects & community benefits: comparative study of tactics and tools used in North American cities

Researcher: Lisa Bornstein
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Large-scale development projects and mega-events are key elements in the contemporary city-building strategies of many municipalities throughout the world. They are seen as transformative, placing a city on the world stage and thereby attracting visitors, jobs, investment and, ultimately, a higher quality of life for city residents. Concerns arise, however, that such projects cater to the wealthy, the ‘creative-class’ and tourists, sidelining investments in the quality-of-life of ordinary people. Social and spatial polarisation are argued to deepen as business reaps economic benefits from urban districts dedicated to spectacle, while local residents bear the hardships: from increased traffic and taxes to the displacement of local businesses and residents.

As a result of these concerns, community groups, governments and developers have shifted gears in the last decade. In a growing number of cities of North America, mega-project proposals specify community benefits: agreements include measures to mitigate environmental and traffic impacts, finance affordable housing, provide for local employment, and address urban blight.

**Research aims:**
The research investigates how community benefits agreements have been reached and how well they work as a means to strengthen the ‘negotiating process’ here in Montreal and identify what is novel about it.

Which community benefits agreement emerge, (b) the form the agreements take, and (c) implications for the project and the wider community, asking: **What new constellations of political actors and political processes are emerging to shape the mega-project development? What new planning tools are being used to assure community benefits from large-scale urban projects? How well do they work?**

Initially, the case study research examined Montreal, Los Angeles, Vancouver and New Haven (Toronto, New York and Pittsburgh are also likely to be studied).

**Key results to date:**
The research has produced detailed information on the organizing and negotiating strategies of community groups, the wording and content of agreements, and difficulties with implementation. Important differences emerge. In the U.S., community groups have had the lead in pushing for legally enforceable benefits agreements; reaching agreements has involved strategic support from unions, alliances with a broad range of civil society actors, and campaign-style mobilization of both grassroots and ‘higher-level’ allies. Canadian examples reflect a more prominent leadership role for government, greater reliance on established consultative or electoral processes, and inclusion of fewer (if any) enforcement measures in the agreement. Detailed information on tactics and tools has fed into CIQ discussions, CIQ-MUHC negotiations, and written documents to support those negotiations. In addition, several conference presentations, academic talks, and academic publications on local politics around mega-projects are based on this work. **For additional information:** CURA Working paper, WP-08-01 Confrontation, collaboration & community benefits. Also, see http://communitybenefits.blogspot.com/