

# Rights go out the window to create a seamless 2010 Olympics Circus

Proposed Vancouver city bylaw against protest during Winter Olympics

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In the flush of bidding for and winning the right to host the Olympics, nobody talked about how staging them might mean limiting civil liberties.

It's only now, with seven months until the 2010 Winter Games begin, that organizers and compliant politicians are revealing plans to make it more difficult to exercise our fundamental constitutional rights to free speech, peaceful assembly and free expression.

For months now, police have been knocking on the doors of known activists and tracking them down in their neighbourhoods to "chat" about their Olympic protest plans. But that's only part of it.

An omnibus bylaw that staff insists is "critical to the success of the Games" goes to Vancouver city council today.

The bylaw relaxes rules for Games-related events, limits free expression and speech in public and private spaces, and grants sweeping discretionary powers to Mayor Gregor Robertson and City Manager Penny Ballem to do whatever is "warranted," "necessary or desirable" to ensure the Olympics' "safety and security" and "protection of commercial rights."

It also claims none of this is intended to impact political expression or the right to lawful protest.

That might not be the intent, but it may be the result. And rather chillingly, we may never know whether any of this is legal because there's little time left for anyone to initiate a court case against these rights-challenging changes before the Olympics begin in February.

Here are some examples of what's in the bylaw:

- It would allow the right to search anyone and their bags at any of the six designated "city sites."

Those include the Vancouver Public Library's main branch, the Roundhouse Community Centre, Queen Elizabeth Theatre and David Lam Park.

- It would prohibit anyone at a city site, who would "cause any disturbance or nuisance interfering with the enjoyment of entertainment on city land by other persons."

Neither 'nuisance' nor 'disturbance' is defined and the bylaw isn't clear whether police or private security will be enforcing the rules.

- The bylaw grants authority to install closed-circuit cameras and set up airport-type security at all city sites.
- To ensure that the inevitable protests will be quiet ones, megaphones, amplification devices or "anything that makes noise" that might interfere with the celebrations are banned at city sites.
- Only signs licensed by the city are allowed at city sites.
- City-licensed street performers won't be allowed along the designated Olympic corridors, celebration sites or near the venues. They will just have to find somewhere else in the city to entertain. Because, heaven knows, they might say or do something undesirable.

Only Vanoc-approved performers will be in the high-traffic areas during the Games.

- No leaflets, pamphlets or flyers with commercial content can be distributed at the celebration sites, along pedestrian corridors leading to Olympic venues or streets in the immediate vicinity of the venues.

The aim is to "create a halo effect," reducing the potential for so-called ambush marketing by companies that aren't Games sponsors, according to the staff report to council.

But it's not clear who will be determining what is commercial and what is political. In addition, the city manager would have the power "to make other rules if warranted" for the sites.

- No vehicles can carry exterior advertising on city streets. Buses are exempt, but Vanoc has already purchased all that advertising space.
- Construction hoardings are expected to be targets for an increased number of posters and graffiti, which the report describes as "a nuisance and eyesore."

Both must be removed immediately or the city will move in, clean up and charge the owners. This is to ensure that — as the report says — Vancouver "puts its best 'look' forward for the Games."

The bylaw's preamble says the aim is to create "a fair and reasonable balance" between "the rights and privileges which citizens of the city customarily enjoy" and enhancing and securing the 2010 Winter Olympics.

But as B.C. Civil Liberties Association president Robert Holmes said Monday, "When they put all of our rights in the balance to create a circus, then they really have gone too far."

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