Municipal collaboration in regional event hosting processes: The case of the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games

By Kyle Rich, Erin Sharpe, Martha Barnes, Carol Phillips, and Emily Romano

Introduction

As the cost of hosting sport events has increased over the past 30 years, so has the public interest and academic research on the impacts of hosting. Rationales for hosting include international prestige, national unity, economic development, and increased physical activity/wellbeing in the general populace. "Prestige" and "unity" are intangibles and difficult to measure. Research on sport and physical activity participation has largely debunked assumptions of a *trickle-down effect* from events (Misener et al., 2015). And research into economic development has found that proposed goals are rarely, if ever, achieved (Zimbalist, 2016; Coates and Humphreys, 2008; Crompton, 2004).

Despite this, event bidding and hosting regularly find their ways into municipal policy, often taking the form of event portfolios or long-term hosting strategies (Ziakas & Costa, 2011). Increasingly, multiple municipalities are involved in hosting arrangements, which take on various forms intended to facilitate a collaborative hosting process. However, little attention is focused on the perspectives and interests of actors from municipal organizations who are involved in hosting processes, despite their central roles dealing with other municipal partners, private facility owners, higher levels of government, and event-specific host societies (Phillips and Barnes, 2015).

The purpose of this policy brief is to examine how local area municipalities collaborated once Niagara Region was awarded the hosting rights to the 2021 Canada Summer Games (which then became the Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games after being delayed one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Canada Games torch
Matthew Murnaghan, Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games

Specifically, we present a case study of the event through which we examine municipal collaboration within the regional hosting model. In our research, we used social network analysis and interviews to understand the structure of the hosting network, as well as municipal actors' understandings of the relationships, collaborations, and event hosting capacity in the Region.

Collaboration is characterized by the exchange of information, sharing of resources, joint problem-solving, and working together on initiatives, to develop a community's capacity to implement an event (Ziakas, 2014). Collaboration, prior planning, and the development of local partnerships have been considered essential in ensuring event impacts are positive and sustainable (Taks et al., 2015; Wasser et al., 2022). Effective communication, the presence of trust, collective commitment to shared goals, and well-established evaluation mechanisms were found to positively affect collaborative partnerships (Lu & Misener, 2022). Research has found that mechanisms to support collaboration are necessary to decrease confusion or conflict amongst stakeholders (Ziakas & Costa, 2011; Wasser et al., 2022).

Capacity is a multi-dimensional concept characterized as a set of attributes critical to an organization's ability to reach its goals and fulfill stakeholder expectations (Millar & Doherty, 2016). An organization's capacity is understood as its ability to draw on several types of organizational capital, including human resources and financial strength, networks and relationships, and infrastructure (Millar & Doherty, 2016; Sharpe, 2006). Given the focus of our work on municipal collaboration, we frame capacity broadly as the assets, knowledge, and networks of a municipality.

This policy brief is organized in three sections. First, we provide background on Niagara 2022 and the regional hosting model to contextualize our case study. Next, we present an overview of our methodology and the findings of our study. Finally, we offer critical reflections and recommendations for policy makers interested in collaborative hosting arrangements and the implementation of regional event hosting models.

CASE STUDY: Niagara 2022 and the Canada Games

Regional hosting strategies, such as that of Niagara 2022, are intended to be collaborative partnerships (Wasser et al., 2022). These approaches engage several municipalities within a regional hosting model through the distribution of hosting responsibilities, cost, risks, and outcomes. However, academic and practical understanding of collaboration

between municipalities within a regional approach is poorly developed. Therefore, Niagara 2022 presents a unique and promising opportunity to explore and better understand these processes.

Niagara Region won the bid in March 2017 and hosted the Canada Summer Games from August 6-21, 2022. The bidding process was led by the Niagara Sport Commission (NSC), a non-profit organization established in 2009 with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. But, the NSC folded in November 2017, just months after Niagara had won the rights to host. This meant that the central organizer of Niagara's bid no longer existed, and both the Region and the municipalities were left to carry out the proposed plan. The bid put together by NSC envisioned a collaborative and regional approach to hosting the Games with the idea that all the municipalities in the region would host events and the Games would highlight 'regional strengths' and draw on its collective capacity. Bidding materials made frequent reference to a 'Team Niagara' with regional cooperation emphasized (Niagara Region, 2017).

The Context of "Team Niagara"

Niagara has a two-tier system of governance. The Regional Municipality of Niagara (also known as Niagara Region) is a legal entity unto itself defined by geographic borders, with taxing powers, governed by its own elected council, run by its own staff, and with a specific set of responsibilities under its jurisdiction. However, it also includes 12 distinct municipalities within its borders, each geographically defined and with their own taxing powers, responsibilities, elected councils and staff. In some areas, the two levels of local government work together. This makes Niagara Region an interesting case study for research on regional hosting models and the municipal perspective given these existing networks and working relationships. In the case of Niagara Region, we looked at a hosting model in which municipalities across two tiers have specific jurisdictional responsibilities.

For our research, it is important to note that the local municipalities have jurisdiction over their parks and recreation facilities, usually as both operator and owner. The Niagara Region has no department with any jurisdiction in this policy area. It does, however, have a robust economic development department within which sport tourism has fallen historically.

The Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games

The Canada Games are a multi-sport national youth event that takes place every two years, alternating between

Canada Games Park
James Ruddy, Niagara 2022
Canada Summer Games

Summer and Winter Games. Provinces and territories each send teams, much like an Olympic Games, and there are opening/closing ceremonies (Bodin & Misener, 2020). There is also a program of cultural events that takes place alongside the sport program. Like other multi-sport events, Canadian cities bid for the right to host the competition, hoping for an influx of visitors, a boost in profile, and the building of new community sport infrastructure. Once the Canada Games Council has named the winning city, a host society is formed in the community and all event planning is run from that hub.

At Niagara 2022, approximately 5,000 athletes and coaches competed in 18 sports located at venues across eight of the Region's municipalities. All 13 municipalities (Niagara Region plus the 12 lower-tier municipalities)

hosted the torch relay as well as rotating one-day "festivals"—called the "13-for-13 events"—with province/territory-themed cultural events. An estimated 4,000 volunteers participated.

The Games' overall budget, estimated at $147 million ($117 million capital and $30 million operating), was funded by all four levels of government (*Personal communications,* 2023). The major legacy construction projects were the new $107-million multi-use sports facility Canada Games Park located adjacent to the Brock University campus on the border of Thorold and St. Catharines, and a $7-million indoor rowing facility at Henley Island in St. Catharines, the bulk of these capital projects was paid for by the federal, provincial, and Niagara Region governments.[1]

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[1] *The federal and provincial governments each pledged $32 million for the capital budget ($29 million each for Canada Games Park plus $3 million each for Henley). Additional capital contributions towards the Canada Games Park were $26.9 million from the Region, $10 million from the City of St. Catharines, and $5 million from the City of Thorold (Niagara Region 2023; Niagara Region 2021). Brock University donated land for the building as well as $3.5 million in kind for use of its facilities during the Games and $500,000 as a financial contribution (Dakin, 2019). The capital budget also included upgrades to several venues across the Region, estimated at a total cost of $1.4 million funded by the hosting municipalities (Niagara Region, 2021). The remainder of the capital budget was funded through approximately $6 million from sponsorships and fundraising (Niagara Region, 2021).*

Research Questions and Methodology

Research Questions

Our research was designed to explore the following questions: 1. How do municipalities understand collaboration within regional hosting processes, and 2. How does capacity (e.g., assets, knowledge, networks) within municipalities and regions affect the nature and scope of their relationships within the regional hosting process?

Methodology

We used a case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to explore municipal collaboration in regional event hosting processes. Within the case study approach, we mapped a network of actors and resources related to Niagara 2022 within the region, and qualitatively examined how municipal actors understood collaboration in regional hosting processes, critically examining the role of capacity therein. To do so, we employed a combination of Social Network Analysis (SNA) and semi-structured interviews.

SNA "aims to describe and explore the patterns apparent in the social relationships that individuals and groups form with each other…through an examination of their structural properties and their implications for social action" (Scott, 2017, p. 2). SNA allowed for the identification of ties (i.e., collaboration) between municipal staff, the Host Society, and volunteers in the network. By identifying actor relationships, a clearer picture emerged of the structure of regional collaboration. Data for the SNA was collected through a five-question, self-administered, web-based survey sent to one actor at each of the 12 municipalities as well as two actors at the Region. In total, 12 usable surveys (10 from municipal actors and two from the Region) were returned, for a response rate of 85 per cent.

Subsequently, respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Eleven interviews were conducted with 10 municipal actors and one actor from the Host Society. Interview questions were focused on their experiences within the hosting process, as well as their understandings of collaboration, and the role of assets, knowledge, and networks therein.

Welland hosted the soccer competition at Young's Sportsplex.
Anil Mungal, Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games

At the point at which municipal staff were interviewed, the Region was one month away from hosting the Games, nearly seven years after initial discussions had begun and five years after the bid was accepted. Event planning had been extended by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, most of the preparation was done and municipal staff had a good understanding of the direct costs and benefits of the Games to their municipality.

Findings

The SNA findings describe the regional network that collaborated in the lead up to the event. The network of actors was comprised primarily of Games' (n=20) staff and municipal government staff (n=14). SNA findings indicate 47 ties existed among actors (see Figure 1). The quality and quantity of this collaboration is further explored in the interview process.

The SNA illustrates the dominance of the Canada Games staff in the network. There were two Host Society actors with whom others in the network sought out ties much more than any other actor. The Host Society received the most links which reinforces the role that it played as gatekeeper of information and the power it held within the network. Most relationships in the network were one-way (indicated by the direction of the arrows), meaning that ties moved in one direction and the relationships were not reciprocal. The prominent role of the Host Society is understandable as it was their responsibility to ensure the delivery of the event through in part, establishing and supporting ties with key actors. However, the structure of the network limited collaboration between municipal actors within the regional hosting model, which is a missed opportunity for collaborative initiatives after the Games.

☐ Canada Games staff
☐ Municipal staff
☐ Volunteer
☐ Regional government
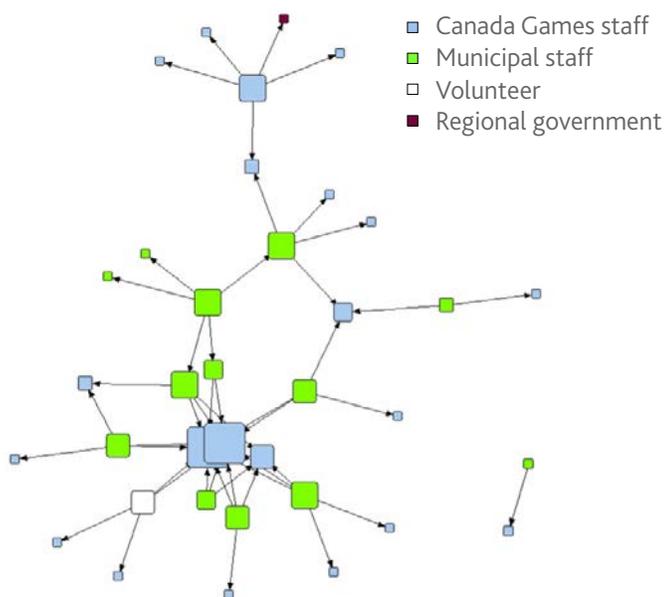
Our interviews identified four underlying themes: a regional mindset, the impact of geography, size, and capacity; networking and communication, and assessing the cost/benefits to each municipality.

A Regional Mindset

According to our interviews, the bid for the 2021 games was the first time Niagara had considered taking a regional approach to sport event hosting. The vision of sharing the responsibility and showing off regional strengths and assets was established in the very initial stages of the bidding process. The independence of the NSC and its regional vision fostered trust and buy-in from municipalities. Municipal actors recognized that the regional mindset was about all municipalities contributing to and benefiting from the Games.

Municipalities also bought into the regional vision because they recognized how the approach made the Niagara bid unique and more attractive. Hosting the Games as a region afforded the Games access to a wider range of high quality and unique venues since it could draw on assets from across the region including a world-class rowing venue in St. Catharines and world-class canoe and kayak facilities in Welland. It also showcased Niagara Falls, Lake Ontario, and Lake Erie, as well as the regional college and university. As noted by one participant:

> "We very quickly rallied together to put together a collective bid and it really shows that there is cohesiveness between the different municipalities, and we do want to work together. I want to see Niagara Falls succeed and Port Colborne succeed, you know, even if an event that I'd like to host ends up in their community."

In two-tier regional municipalities such as Niagara, creating and sustaining a regional mindset that can overcome inter-municipal competition appears to be an important antecedent of engagement in a regional hosting model.

The Challenges of Geography, Size, and Capacity

Although every municipality bought into the idea of a regional hosting approach, municipal actors noted that ensuring the inclusion of 12 municipalities was challenging. One major challenge was the difference in size, capacity, and geographical location. In Niagara, the majority of the population and economic activity is centralized around its geographic centre, at the nexus of the 'big three' municipalities: Niagara Falls, Welland, and St. Catharines. Additionally, municipalities vary dramatically in the financial resources, material assets, and number of staff

they have available to dedicate to events like these Games. These differences were noted in interviews from the smaller and larger municipalities alike. One participant reflected on these challenges:

> *The hosting piece I think has been a challenge from day one. Regionally, probably because in Niagara our municipalities differ so much in terms of size and scale and presence…I don't know that it's necessarily an apple to apples…It was like the big three communities that kind of benefitted and it's always kind of that way…So, I'm happy to see this time that there are some things in the smaller communities in Niagara because if we're really talking about a regional hosting model, then everyone needs to be included.*

Although the bid outlined a plan to share the load and spread the benefits, the reality was that most of the activities were taking place at Canada Games Park. Further, as plans became more 'real' after the Games were awarded to Niagara, there were changes to the original allocation plan that resulted in further consolidation toward the centre.

Participants from the outskirt municipalities recognized and accepted their lesser role in hosting the event. From their perspective, it seemed "obvious" that they would be overlooked for legacy projects and that funds for new facilities would be directed to larger population areas. In fact, the centralization of events worked in favour of some municipalities who determined that they were not interested in continuing with the commitments made at the bid stage.

The inclusion of the 13-for-13 cultural program at the Games afforded another way for municipalities to meaningfully participate in regional event hosting, without having to meet facility and competition requirements. Through the cultural program, each municipality partnered with a province or territory and had the freedom to craft a public event that was appropriate for its capacity and specific goals. Typically, these "festivals" included music and food celebrating the partnering province/territory.

Networking and Communication

As is typical in large-scale event hosting, soon after the bid was won a Host Society organization was created to serve as the executors and operational stewards of the Games on behalf of the Canada Games Council. What developed was a hub-and-spoke network (borne out by our social network analysis) that frustrated municipal actors and circumvented the collaborative nature of the model proposed in the initial bid.

According to interviews, the relationship between municipalities began to change after the Host Society was established. The bidding stage was collaborative and cohesive; municipal actors were invited to the planning table and made meaningful contributions. Communication with the Host Society was less collaborative; rather than communicate with one another, municipalities communicated only with the Host Society. One municipal actor described the change:

> *I don't find we're communicating as a regional hub and maybe we don't need to, I don't know. But I don't even really see us as a bit of a hub kind of collective anymore. I just see us as having a relationship with the Host Society now…I mean, there's some meetings where we all talk and we all get in the same room, but it's really talking to the Host Society. It's all just kind of going up and through. We're not really functioning as a collective unless it's facilitated by the Host Society.*

The network with the Host Society as a key actor was a source of frustration among municipal actors for several reasons. One was that it failed to recognize, or integrate, the established professional sport and recreation network in the region. Relationships among municipal sport and recreation staff were strong and staff in different municipalities communicated regularly about common issues. The network had strengthened further through COVID-19 disruptions as municipalities sought to find consensus on policy-related service decisions.

As a result of the event's network structure, municipal actors felt that their role in hosting was much less involved and meaningful. Rather than feeling like a part of a Team Niagara and working towards a common goal, they felt as though the event lost some of its significance: the Host Society had become "just another user group."

Assessing the Costs and Benefits

Although financial resources and sport-hosting opportunities were clearly not distributed equally or proportionally among the 12 municipalities, we found that for the most part, this disparity did not factor into how municipal actors assessed their municipality's involvement in the Games. Instead, the municipal involvement was assessed, not in terms of the size of its role, but in terms of costs and benefits. Municipalities that considered the regional hosting approach a success were those that viewed the benefits of their participation outweighing the costs of that participation to the municipality.

A new rowing practice facility on Henley Island was built for the Games.
Raimondo + Associates Architects

For example, the City of St. Catharines invested $10 million in Canada Games Park because it filled an existing need for new sport and recreation space in the city. Specifically, the new facility aligned with the city's arena strategy as it included two ice pads and allowed the city to decommission one of its older rinks.

In other municipalities, there was some frustration expressed if the event used existing facilities and municipal actors did not feel that adequate resources had been added to facilitate their subsequent increased workload. A significant amount of staff time was neither recognized nor accounted for. In fact, some municipal staff were expected to work for the Games outside of their official staff position, as volunteers.

But I do feel like sometimes the value that the municipalities are putting forward in-kind isn't getting fully recognized…I think some of the decisions might be sponsorship and dollar-driven, maybe at the expense of some of the municipal partnership pieces, but I mean, I guess they have to fill their bottom line too.

Some municipal actors expressed that the Games allowed them to develop different kinds of organizational capacity. These benefits included developing expertise in event hosting on a larger scale:

We've learned a lot from (the Host Society) in terms of how they do some of this and how they set (the venue) up, even just some improvements to the facility … So, for us, there's been a lot of value in that, in terms of looking at how we could use our venue in a bigger way.

Municipal actors also considered the personal benefits of involvement in the Games. One municipal actor viewed their involvement as a career highlight and a 'feather in (their) cap'. Another acknowledged how the Games was a great opportunity for career development and advancement.

Our research demonstrates that Niagara municipalities entered the bid for the Canada Summer Games with a regional mindset and "Team Niagara" approach. But there were challenges along the way: the differences in

populations, location within the region, and in resources such as finances, facilities, and staff. The network structure of the hosting model also had important implications for how the regional hosting model worked. The regional approach however, allowed municipalities with very different levels of capacity to engage in different ways, learning about costs and benefits through the process.

Our findings provide a nuanced examination of the experiences of municipal actors within a regional hosting model. They speak to the importance of existing networks within and between municipalities, and how various kinds of capacity are implicated in collaborative hosting partnerships. These findings can inform decision-making related to how event bids are pursued and assessed, and how hosting structures can be strategically engaged to be beneficial for participating municipalities.

Recommendations

The literature cautions about the gap between good intentions while bidding for an event and the reality of its implementation once the bid is won. While event hosts may not be able to eliminate that gap, we suggest it can be reduced and a regional hosting model is one way that this can be achieved.

Drawing on previous literature (highlighted earlier in the introduction) as well as our findings, we offer several recommendations for municipal policy makers who may be considering event hosting as part of a region. Our recommendations focus on collaborative opportunities within a regional hosting model with the end-goal of increasing the ability to see substantive, positive, and sustainable impacts of hosting events.

1. *Carefully consider and assess the role of existing networks and associations in the region, and how they might be used in a regional hosting model.*

    Existing networks are powerful structures that can play important roles in collaboration. They involve trust that is already established between actors, they have existing organization/administrative structures, and they present an opportunity for sustained and shared development of institutional knowledge. When structures pre-date the event, they are also likely to continue once the event is finished. Importantly, these networks should be critically assessed for their existing roles/reputation, as well as their sustainability within a region. Just as a strong network can facilitate collaboration between various partners, it can also be detrimental to a collaborative partnership.

Wrestling competition in the Walker Sports & Abilities Centre at Canada Games Park
Photo courtesy Brock University

2. *Regional collaboration begins before event planning starts.*

Regions are fundamentally about shared understandings of similarities and differences. Therefore, strong regional identities or mindsets can be an important antecedent to collaborative partnerships. For this reason, municipal actors in regions (like Niagara) that are formally constituted (e.g., as a Regional Municipality) are likely to understand how shared working arrangements look and how common goals can be achieved. Further, it is likely that relationships between municipal actors in these regions already exist. Regions that are not formally constituted or structured, may need to work to build trust, understanding, and shared ideas before engaging in collaborative event hosting plans or partnerships.

3. *To facilitate collaboration within event hosting, specific mechanisms should be implemented to allow municipalities to work together on shared initiatives.*

Collaboration only occurs when actors can work together on shared tasks towards mutually beneficial outcomes. If political and organizational structures do not exist within a region prior to an event, it is unlikely that collaborative relationships will emerge spontaneously. Further, a tendency towards centralized event governance structures (around host organizations), may discourage collaborative work between other stakeholders. Therefore, collaboration within regional hosting models requires networks and working relationships that are not simply a constellation of random single events, each connected separately to one central actor or organization. An established and ongoing central body to coordinate events and bidding, like the former NSC and the new Sport Niagara, could ensure all municipalities in the region are provided with the opportunity to benefit from any large-scale sport event.

4. *Be creative and strategic in planning for and implementing both sport and cultural programs.*

While sport and cultural events often require similar hosting capacities, technical elements outlined by national or international governing bodies (e.g., facility specifications) often make hosting sport events difficult. Cultural events on the other hand offer opportunities for creativity and scaling of events according to the hosting capacity of different municipalities. In this way, a clear vision for a cultural program that includes all municipalities in a meaningful way may ensure that the regional mindset and nature of an event can be preserved throughout the planning and hosting process. While hosting plans inevitably change between the bidding and

hosting stage, well planned regional elements of an event can mitigate disappointment and allow for capacity-related issues to be resolved effectively.

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Corinne Bosch, Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games

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The Niagara Community Observatory (NCO) at Brock University is a public-policy think-tank working in partnership with the Niagara community to foster, produce, and disseminate research on current and emerging local issues. More information on our office, and an electronic copy of this report, can be found on its website www.brocku.ca/nco or follow on X @BrockNCO

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