

The Olympics' gay adventure

Next year's games will take place in Atlanta's gayest neighborhood, and plans are underway to welcome the world

by Richard Shumate

Next summer's Olympic Games in Atlanta will mark a queerly different milestone.

These are believed to be the first modern Olympics where the village that will house the athletes, along with many of the venues where they will compete, will be located in a predominantly gay neighborhood. And—despite a festering dispute between Olympic organizers and activists over the role Cobb County will play in the city's Olympic odyssey—Atlanta's Midtown community is making plans to welcome the world.

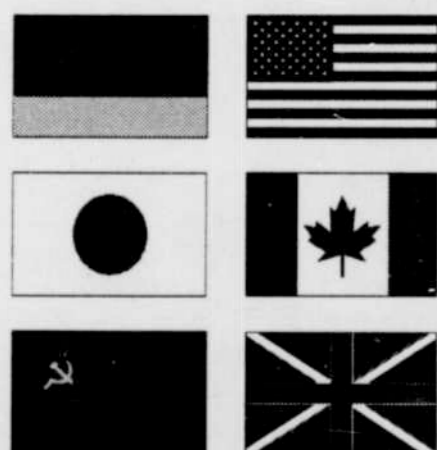
The centerpiece of that effort will be a 24-hour gay and lesbian visitors' center, located within walking distance of most Olympic events, that will provide information and assistance to athletes and visitors. Mayor Bill Campbell's gay and lesbian advisory committee is currently drawing up plans for the center and trying to bring the city's pride committee and other organizations on board to help fund and staff it.

"We don't want to be wallflowers at the big

putting together the visitors' center, McDonald says ACOG turned down a request to fund it. So corporate donors will be sought to pay for the center, and the advisory committee is trying to get a landlord to donate space by pointing out that the center will be an attraction likely to draw large numbers of people to other businesses on the same property.

While the city's lesbian and gay community will be having the Olympics in its back yard, its relationship with ACOG has been rocky for the past two years, ever since ACOG announced that preliminary volleyball competition would be held in Cobb County. In August 1993, county commissioners in Cobb, a suburban enclave of 450,000 people just northwest of the city, passed a resolution stating that the "gay lifestyle" was incompatible with Cobb's community standards. Despite two years of continued protest, they have refused to rescind the resolution.

Faced with threats of a massive protest in 1996, ACOG eventually removed the volleyball venue from Cobb, and the Olympics Out of Cobb



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dance. We want to participate," says Phil McDonald, the city official who facilitates the committee. A site hasn't been selected yet, "but we feel it is important to be close enough to the village that the athletes who are here will be able to walk to the center," says McDonald.

The Olympic Village is being constructed on the Georgia Tech campus, which is just west of Midtown, the city's most identifiable gay neighborhood. Atlanta's largest cluster of gay bars is but a quarter mile from the village, and a number of venues, including the swimming and diving stadium, are also at Tech.

And while that provides the opportunity for extraordinary visibility for the gay and lesbian community during the 16-day run of the games, it will also create some problems for Midtown residents who are living with AIDS. The city plans to block off many Midtown streets for 16 hours each day, making it almost impossible to access the neighborhood except on foot. Project Open Hand, which delivers meals to people with AIDS who are shut in, may face interruption of its normal delivery routes. Also, Grady Memorial Hospital's Infectious Disease Clinic, the primary medical provider for indigent HIV patients, is located in the area that will be cordoned off.

City and Fulton County health officials are currently working with the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games to develop a plan to continue services to people during the games. No final plan has been announced.

Though the mayor's gay and lesbian advisory committee has received ACOG's cooperation in

Coalition, the group formed to fight ACOG's initial decision, disbanded. But the coalition was revived this summer after ACOG President Billy Payne indicated in a television interview that the Olympic torch run may go through Cobb County, though the final route for the torch won't be announced until the end of the year. Not willing to wait for a final decision, the coalition is organizing nationwide protests now.

Jon-Ivan Weaver, co-chair of the coalition, says his group does not oppose the idea of building a welcome center for lesbian and gay visitors and athletes. But that does not mean that the protests against the torch run have been called off.

"There are going to be protests. They are going to happen," says Weaver.

The torch will make its way through parts of 40 states before arriving in Atlanta next July. The coalition met with activists in November at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference, held in Detroit, to organize the troops for protest at every city along the way. The effort will culminate in actions against the torch in Cobb County and Atlanta.

"The response [at the NGLTF conference] was very supportive of what we are doing," Weaver says. "I think ACOG is in for a really big surprise if they think they can go into Cobb County without problems."

He adds, "We're not telling people not to attend [the Olympics]. But as for myself, I will not be attending any events. I am going to be very busy."

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