

# Power Without Authority: Los Angeles Elites and the Construction of the Coliseum

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In 1920 Los Angeles was the tenth largest city in the United States, yet in three years it would secure the privilege of staging an Olympic Games in 1932 and construct an enormous outdoor arena, the Coliseum, for the staging of sports events and other festivities. These achievements were not secured by the local government, but rather by private citizens, acting in what they believed was the community interest.

The movement to secure the Olympics and build the Coliseum was led by Harry Chandler and other L.A. newspaper publishers together with leading businessmen, realtors, and financiers. In 1919 they organized the Community Development Association to promote the reputation of L.A. and Southern California as a center of tourism as a place to live. A cornerstone of their program was to build a major sporting complex which their city lacked. Cities throughout the U.S. had new outdoor arenas, usually owned by professional baseball teams or colleges, but this facility was to be a public edifice. This was a relatively novel scheme since there was only one important municipal stadium at the time (San Diego).

The CDA planned for the city to finance the stadium through a bond issue. On August 31, 1920, the voters went to the polls and defeated a referendum calling for a \$900,000 bond issue to pay for the facility. Disappointed with the outcome, the CDA came up with another scheme. The alternative plan was for the city and county to lease land in Exposition Park, across the street from USC to the CDA. Then the CDA would construct a sports complex with the expenses covered by a low interest bank loan, secured with the good name of the city and county. The cost would be recouped from rent the local governments would pay for ten years use of the Coliseum. Once the legality of the plan was recognized by the California Supreme Court in May, 1921, the program was put into operation. The Coliseum was completed in 1923 with 75,000 seats, making it the second largest arena in the country, overshadowed only by Baltimore's Memorial Stadium. The playing field measured 344' x 680'. The total cost was \$900,000.

By the terms of the lease, control over the stadium was scheduled to pass to the city and county in 1931. With the Olympic Games coming in 1932, that created some problems. In 1929 the CDA began a fight to continue operating the facility beyond 1931. They proposed a \$900,000 improvement to get the park ready for the Olympics. This entailed adding 25,000 seats and replacing temporary wooden sections with concrete construction. Mayor George Cryer opposed continued control of a public facility by a private corporation, regardless of its benevolent character. The administration pointed out the CDA was reaping the advantages of control, was over paying its employees, and was not reporting their expenses. Cryer felt the city could do a better job.

The dilemma was worked out under the new mayor, John Porter. Early in 1930 the city and county agreed to extend the CDA's control until after the Olympics. Together they also appropriated nearly \$1 million to replace the wooden seats enlarge the seating capacity. Three years later, control of the Coliseum was turned over to a joint city and county commission.

The influence of the city's elite in building and operating the Coliseum reflected their power in Los Angeles. They were the town's prime movers and shakers, not the elected public officials. The project reflected their foresight, but also their arrogance and lack of confidence in public officials. Their response to the need for a huge stadium was not the only way since Chicago, Philadelphia, and other cities all built municipal stadiums which were publicly financed and publicly controlled.