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“We are providing an alternative to massive stagings”

Hans Stöckli is an enthusiastic campaigner for more modest and honest Olympic Games. But in bidding to host the Sion 2026 Winter Olympics, one thing is clear for the Berne politician: anyone wishing to kindle the Olympic flame in Switzerland needs very good arguments.

INTERVIEW: MARC LETTAU

Hans Stöckli, we have known you until now as a passionate politician, but not as an enthusiastic sports fan. Are we doing you an injustice?

Well you have at least overlooked something important. As mayor of Biel I pushed through what is currently the most modern ice hockey and football stadium in Switzerland, the Tissot Arena, and brought the country's largest sports event to the city, the 2013 Swiss Gymnastics Festival. What's more, together with my wife I have completed the Biel 100-kilometre run eight times. And lastly, I'm the proud holder of a season ticket for the winter sports facilities in Saas-Fee until the 2030/2031 season. So you'll find me on the pistes until I'm at least 80.

But a standing subscription for the ski lifts doesn't explain why you are pushing for the Winter Olympics.

It wasn't the pistes that got me enthusiastic about the Olympics, but Fränk Hofer, the Director of the Swiss Gymnastics Festival. The basic idea he convinced me of was that if Switzerland wants to bid for the Winter Olympics at all, it has to do so with a project that takes the best existing infrastructure around the country into account – irrespective of cantonal borders. My first contribution was simply just to merge the Olympic plans of Valais and Vaud with those in the canton of Berne,

turning them into a national approach. This is what gave rise to Sion2026.

Why are you doing this? As a social democrat you must certainly hear your comrades warn against the overblown nature of the Olympics?

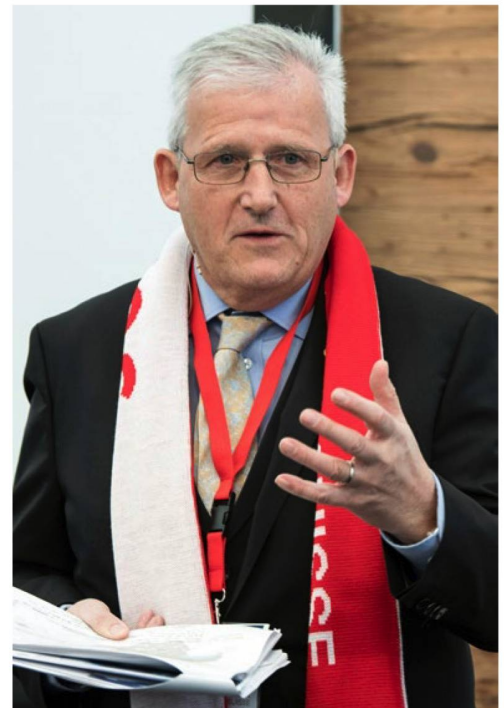
They're absolutely right! And Sion 2026 represents a clear rejection of the negative experiences associated with previous Olympics.

We think we know what is coming next: can you do everything much better?

We will be able to say quite specifically what will be different – and better – if Sion 2026 is awarded the Games. We will be resolute in implementing the objectives that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) formulated in its Agenda 2020: games that are decentralised and more modest, games that primarily use existing facilities, Winter Olympics held where snow actually falls.

So you are taking the IOC at their word and focusing wholly on their sustainability policy?

Yes, we will be insisting on sustainability, also in terms of costs. We have been saying from the very beginning that we will not bend. Our candidacy is very much a take it or leave it option! There is no reason to bend anyway. If the IOC follows its own new policy, then our candidacy is an excellent one. If the IOC capitulates and succumbs once more to the tempta-



Hans Stöckli is a social democrat and Council of States member for Berne. A lawyer and former mayor of Biel, he is also Vice-President of the Sion 2026 Association and as such is responsible for the sustainability agenda of the Olympic candidacy. Photos: Keystone

tion of organising Games at tremendous cost in the large capitals of the world, we don't stand a chance anyway.

It sounds like a cheap novel: the noble knights from Switzerland clean up the Olympic ideal...

It's not a case of us dictating to the IOC how they should proceed. Rather, the IOC knows very well that our candidacy is capable of returning sense and integrity to the Olympic move-

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Sion 2026 will create spectacular images broadcast throughout the world, but will also stimulate the debate as to how tourism and everyday life in the Alpine region can develop sustainably. In the photo: Didier Defago at the Olympic downhill in Vancouver 2010

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ment. In other words: Sion 2026 shows how the sustainability agenda formulated by the IOC itself can actually be implemented. Were Sion 2026 to fail, this would also be a resounding slap in the face for the IOC – which is obviously based in Lausanne and therefore close to our project – and difficult to digest.

Filling the Olympics with sense and integrity again: in specific terms, how does Sion 2026 intend to live up to this bold declaration?

By not just talking about an Olympic candidacy, but about a project for the next generation. We need to think over a period of 20 years, from today until 2036. During this period we need to organise the Games on a sustainable and successful basis, while at the same time doing everything we

can so that the impact before, during and especially after the Games remains productive. Specifically, this means that we are planning solutions that are excellent in terms of their energy footprint and that are practically CO₂-neutral. It also means that we envisage traffic solutions with the railways as the main means of transportation. And, it means, almost exclusively, using existing infrastructure for sports and leisure activities.

Yet energy and environmental considerations before a large-scale event are self-evident, and not a “project for the next generation”.

We are striving to do much more, and can only defend our candidacy if it has a positive impact in numerous areas. With our Olympic candidacy we have to help drive a fundamental, positive development

forward in Switzerland. So in no way are we just talking about sport. Our questions are: How can life in the Alpine region be safeguarded? How will all-year tourism develop? How can innovation boost our economic strength? How can our long-term project impact on healthcare, energy strategy and culture? How can the Games contribute to integration?

So you care about renewal and change. But why do you need the cumbersome Olympic vehicle to achieve this?

A very interesting question. A past experience influenced me in this context. During the Swiss national exhibition Expo.02, I was part of another such boost to development. Since then I have remained firmly convinced that many developments and forms of cooperation can be cre-

ated, accelerated and strengthened thanks only to such large projects. The Sion 2026 candidacy involves five cantons and 22 cities and municipalities. This is really demanding in terms of organisation. But it also offers a great chance because large events have a unifying power. It also means, however, that organising Olympic Games in Valais alone is not

in Switzerland, which is a shame: it's easy to win medals there.

And if Sion 2026 is awarded the Games, will the inevitable not happen: the noble principles are forgotten under pressure, and normal, i.e. unsustainable, Games are organised?

When decisions have been made by Parliament and the people, one is

land we can organise affordable Winter Olympics that are simple, modest but also very sporting. We have to deliver an alternative to the massive, excessively expensive stagings of the Games.

Looking ahead, we assume that if Sion 2026 is awarded the Games, Switzerland will still win no medals in speed skating. What will it win?

It will win a reputation as a nation that can be the perfect host. It will win trust, because it kept its promises regarding sustainability in the Games. And it will win recognition for doing so without exceeding its budget.

www.sion2026.ch

Between vision and opposition

Sion 2026 presents a concept for a more modest Winter Olympic Games. Instead of concentrating everything at one venue and erecting new infrastructure used only for a short period, Sion 2026 wants to use existing sports facilities in the cantons of Valais, Vaud, Freiburg, Bern and Graubünden, linking them into an overall concept and a comprehensive sustainability project. The chances of Sion 2026 succeeding are still up in the air, especially since there will be various referendums and the scepticism of Swiss people regarding Olympic Games in their own country is sometimes considerable.

In the spring of this year, the citizens of Graubünden firmly rejected the plans for the canton's own Olympic candidacy at the ballot box, adding to the list of failed candidacies in the country. Olympic plans previously rejected by the people include Zurich (referendum in 1969), Bern (1969, 2002), Valais (1963), Vaud (1986) and – before this latest rejection – in Graubünden (1985, 2013). So Sion 2026 will have to negotiate at least two hurdles: one in its own country, and the other in the contest with its rival bidders. (MUL)

enough, an event involving the whole of Switzerland is required.

There is only support for Olympic Games in Switzerland if the ecological concerns are dealt with. Nobody wants to see a repeat of Sochi in the Alps.

Examples like Sochi are a huge handicap for us. However, we have very good arguments and can already present convincing facts. Up to 80 percent of our project can be implemented on existing facilities, and the exceptions are listed: in Kandersteg we will need to build a temporary big hill for ski-jumping. We will also need a facility for speed skating, because this sport does not have any real tradition

much more resistant to attempts to exert pressure – even from the IOC. This is why such democratic decisions are so important. Above all though, there will be a fat red line drawn with our project that we may not cross, as otherwise we would lose our credibility.

Voters have already torpedoed many Olympic projects in Switzerland. Does that not unsettle you?

No. Voters in Valais have already voted yes to Olympic Games on three occasions. What is more, the whole of Switzerland loves Olympic medals. So we are showing the world that in a democratic country like Switzer-



Olympic Games have been held twice in Switzerland before – in 1928 and 1948, both times in St. Moritz.