

June 21, 2011

To
Mayor Dean Fortin
& Members of Council
City of Victoria
1, Centennial Square
Victoria BC

Dear Mayor Fortin,
Councillor Marianne Alto
Councillor Chris Coleman
Councillor Lynn Hunter
Councillor Philippe Lucas
Councillor John Luton
Councillor Pamela Madoff
Councillor Charlayne Thornton-Joe
Councillor Geoff Young

Re: City of Victoria Blue Community Resolution

The Council of Canadians and CUPE Local 50 thank the City of Victoria for taking up this important resolution to declare Victoria a Blue Community and urge the council to pass the resolution unchanged. A Blue Community:

1. Recognizes water as a human right
2. Promotes publicly financed, owned and operated water and wastewater services
3. Restricts and bans the sale of bottled water in civic facilities and at municipal events.

More information about the Blue Community initiative can be found in the document - Blue Communities Project Guide – A Joint initiative of the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).⁽¹⁾

Water as human right

The United Nation's resolutions recognizing the human right to water are legally binding on countries and should be implemented by all levels of government. Promoting the human right is critical to ensuring that the growing commodification, privatisation and enclosure of public water by private entities do not cut off access to water due to financial considerations. Fresh water is a commons resource and must be managed as a public good. The resolution to declare water a human right is a strong commitment to ensuring access to water for all regardless of ability to pay. It is a declaration that just providing access is not sufficient.⁽²⁾

Public Financing, Ownership and Operation

Local communities directly own and operate the vast majority of Canadian drinking water and sewage treatment facilities. But as the need for reinvestment grows, lack of

infrastructure funding and ideology based political pressure forces local governments to consider privatising through public-private partnerships (P3s), but they should be cautioned. The Blue Community Guide has many examples of cases in which the promised savings to taxpayers, or the risk shifting to private entities never materialized. The City of Hamilton, despite privatizing its sewage infrastructure, was on the hook for cleanup costs after a spill. The city of Paris, France, home to water privatization giants Suez and Veolia, did not renew private contracts in 2009 and took the water back for the public. In just one year, the city has been able to operate at a surplus and reduce rates for its people. P3 projects are not popular with the public, as the public hearings around the Greater Victoria sewage treatment proposal in 2010 very clearly indicated. Committing Victoria to public financing, ownership and operation is the popular and economically sound decision that keeps water in the commons, and publicly managed.

Bottled Water Sales

The city of Victoria helps manage a water infrastructure that produces some of the cleanest, tastiest, and most accessible tap water in Canada. Bottle water companies all over Canada use municipal water as sources, bottling already clean water and using a big marketing infrastructure to sell water at a 200-4000 fold price mark-up. One of the common marketing tactics used is the insinuation that drinking water fountains and tap water are tainted, and are potentially unsafe. In opposing bottled water bans in London Ontario⁽³⁾, in the City of Toronto, in the provinces of Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and a total of 85 municipalities that have some restriction on bottled water sales, Nestle Corporation routinely sends out distorted information on the safety of drinking water fountains, posits the sale of bottled water in municipal facilities as increasing consumer choice, and claims that bottled water is not a substitute to tap water. The insinuation that drinking water fountains, and by extension, public water infrastructure are unsafe is insulting. The continuing sale of bottled water in municipal facilities that already provide good public water access is a strong message that we do not consider our drinking water good enough, and therefore provide a “premium” alternative. Our municipal water is the premium product. It is tested regularly for safety and contamination, as opposed to bottled water. By not providing bottled water at municipal facilities, we commit to stand proudly behind the quality of our water and push back against any insinuations that bottled water is superior.

The argument that municipal facilities MUST provide bottled water to increase choice is flawed. Bottled water is available at every corner store, gas station, grocery store already and restricting sale in municipal facilities does not restrict choice. Once again, it is a commitment to clean, affordable water. Also, the false choice between water and soda that is posited as an argument to sell bottled water is provided without evidence that this actually occurs in practice.

While single use water bottles are recyclable, recycling rates, especially outside single family homes, are low, with overall recycling rates varying anywhere from 50-65%⁽⁴⁾. This means that half of the single use plastic bottles end up in the landfill. In BC, it is estimated that 44 million PET plastic water bottles ended up in landfills in 2007⁽⁵⁾. This represents a 247% increase since 2002, and is unacceptable, given the lifecycle impacts of the bottle. While the

city can provide good access to recycling, the better alternative is to reduce use of the water bottles, especially where superior alternatives are available, as in municipal facilities.

In closing, we urge you to stand up strong for Victoria's public water and infrastructure, and pass the Blue Community Initiative. This will be a popular decision. The June 21st edition of the Victoria Times Colonist has written an excellent editorial endorsing this decision⁽⁶⁾. We leave you with a quote from the editorial.

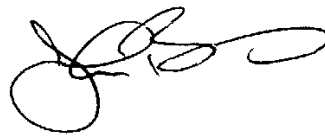
“At times, bottled water makes sense. But most of the time, we are buying bottles simply for the sake of convenience. And it's time to admit that the cost is too high.”

Please email us at info@victoriacouncilofcanadians.ca if you have any questions about this letter, and about the Blue Community Initiative.

Sincerely



Bharat Chandramouli, Ph. D
Volunteer Board member
Council of Canadians, Victoria Chapter



John Burrows
President
CUPE Local 50

References

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4. Canada: Too many plastic bottles, too little landfill – The Toronto Sun, 2008 -
<http://www.insidethebottle.org/canada-too-many-plastic-bottles-too-little-landfill>
5. Getting Off the Bottle Campaign – Toxics Free Canada, 2009
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6. Dumping bottled water – Victoria Times Colonist, June 21, 2011
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