

Painting the Town "Blue"

One Community at a Time



by **Meera Karunanathan**

Communities across Canada have a new way

to show their support for public drinking water.

The Blue Communities Project – launched on World Water Day by the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Union of Public Employees – is based on the premise that water is a “commons” or public resource that should be managed and distributed according to environmental and social justice principles.

Canada’s public drinking water system was built at the turn of the century when governments in industrialized countries realized that the only way to contain epidemics and ensure a healthy population and strong workforce was to provide safe drinking water.

After decades of public control, most Canadians now benefit from one of the best public drinking water systems in the world, with the notable exception of several Indigenous and rural communities that struggle with water access and contamination problems.

At a time when corporations see the commodification of water and privatization of water services as one of the few stable sources of investment and economic growth, it is more important than ever to improve access to communities that have been denied clean water, and to maintain public control over water and water services.

THE BLUE COMMUNITIES PROJECT

Municipalities are on the front lines of the Canadian water crisis. They are responsible for the treatment and distribution of water at a time of increased water shortages and water contamination. They must maintain extremely high drinking water standards even though the federal government fails to provide adequate funding for much-needed infrastructure upgrades and maintenance. Municipalities currently face a \$31 billion deficit in water infrastructure funding, and one-

quarter of our municipalities have faced water shortages in recent years.

The Blue Communities Project is about giving municipalities and community activists the tools and resources to protect water resources and promote publicly owned and operated water services by adopting a water commons framework. The project calls on municipalities to declare water a human right, promote public water and ban the sale and provision of bottled water in municipal facilities, and promote publicly owned and operated water and waste water services.

DECLARING WATER A HUMAN RIGHT

The recognition of water as a human right in Canada would ensure that all people living in this country are legally entitled to sufficient quantities of safe, clean drinking water and water for sanitation, and would require that inequalities in access to water be addressed immediately. Unfortunately, water is not officially recognized as a human right by the federal government.

Municipal recognition of the right to water would, among other things, safeguard against a pricing scheme limiting access to drinking water, ensure all residents have equal access to adequate supplies of safe, clean water, and provide citizens with information about their water supply and services. It would also create much-needed momentum to apply pressure on other levels of government to play their role in recognizing water as a human right.

BANNING BOTTLED WATER

The Blue Communities Project calls on municipalities to promote their own municipal drinking water rather than sending mixed messages by selling bottled water in public facilities.

Canadians consume two billion litres of bottled water per year. Canada is a net exporter of bottled water, selling its ancient glacier waters all over the world, mostly for the profit of big foreign-owned water companies like Nestlé, Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

The Council's National Water Campaigner Meera Karunanathan speaks to students during the recent Atlantic water tour to promote the Blue Communities Project. Students were encouraged to find ways to protect public water now and for future generations.



In order to persuade people to spend up to 3,000 times as much as they spend on tap water, bottled water companies advertise their products as a “safer and healthier” alternative. Nothing could be further from the truth. Regulation of tap water is far more stringent than regulation of bottled water, which is inspected on average only once every three years. Municipal tap water is tested continuously during and after treatment.

Increasingly, Canadians are moving back to the tap and rejecting bottled water. A growing number of Canadian municipalities, school boards and other institutions are banning the sale and purchase of bottled water in their facilities and at their events.

PROMOTING PUBLIC WATER INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

Drinking water services have important public health and environmental implications. Protecting the public interest requires public control and autonomy.

Accountability is lost when municipalities look to public-private partnerships (P3s) for water delivery. Despite the evidence that P3s are more expensive, financially risky, less effective and unaccountable, the federal government is aggressively pushing privatization as a prerequisite for federal infrastructure funding. The Harper government’s “Building Canada” infrastructure plan requires governments seeking \$50 million or more in federal project contributions to consider privatization through a costly and time-consuming P3 review.

THE FUTURE OF WATER

The economic crisis should force us to rethink the wisdom of relying on the precarious market system for providing essential services such as water treatment and distribution. When it comes to water services we cannot afford to give corporations a stake, only to have them pull out when the deal is no longer lucrative. We need a model for our water that puts the public interest and the environment ahead of corporate profit. It’s time to turn our communities “Blue.”

For more information about the Blue Communities Project and ways you can support public water, visit our website at www.canadians.org/water, or email bluecommunities@canadians.org.

Meera Karunanathan is the National Water Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.



Photo submitted by Lori Snider

Students from Napanee District High School did their part to promote public water this past World Water Day. They agreed to a voluntary bottled water ban and signed a hand-painted tap water pledge promising to drink tap water.

Youth Ban the Bottle on World Water Day

Students at Napanee District High School in Napanee, Ontario, ditched the bottle for World Water Day.

Inspired by the Council’s work to raise awareness about the perils of bottled water, students with the school’s Environmental Club held an event to mark World Water Day on March 22, 2009. The event was one of more than 50 that took place across the country as part of the Council of Canadians’ national day of action for World Water Day.

Students agreed to a voluntary bottled water ban on their school grounds, and over one lunch hour, all 1,200 formed a huge perimeter around the school and did “the wave” to show their support for public water.

In the lead-up to the Napanee event, students picked up empty water bottles from the school grounds. “We were just astonished at how many water bottles we found,” said Lori Snider, a parent volunteer at

the school and Council of Canadians member. The bottles were put together in one massive form, showing the waste that is produced when people buy packaged water.

Snider was happy to see her three children, Ellie, Benny and Curtis, all get involved. Ellie painted the large murals that students signed pledging to ditch bottled water and drink only tap water, while her brothers helped gather the empty bottles and hand out information.

“We were trying to find creative ways to educate students and get them thinking,” said Snider. “We wanted them to realize that [bottled water] is a big problem that’s happening now and it’s important to care.”

Snider feels the event had an impact. “You could tell [the students] were thinking about it more, and then they are going to have an impact with their friends,” she said. “Maybe the next time they see someone drinking bottled water they can help educate them.”