

WRITTEN BY MARK CALZAVARA

GOING BLUE

TURNING THE TIDE ON WATER PRIVATIZATION

Bad ideas spread like viruses. And just like with viruses, to prevent these ideas from spreading and becoming epidemic in our communities, we must inoculate the public through education, advocacy, and action.

The idea that privatizing public water systems will save money and improve service is a very bad idea that continues to mutate and circulate despite mountains of evidence to the contrary.

Like any other virus, privatization thrives when systems are exhausted, run down, and poorly maintained (in this case, due to austerity cuts to maintenance and expansion). Our water infrastructure has been made vulnerable thanks to a decades-long failure to invest in maintaining the proper function and capacity of these systems. According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Canada faces a deficit of more than \$100 billion to repair and replace neglected water infrastructure. It is easier to convince people to accept privatization if the public system is broken.

Council supporters that have been with us for a decade or more will recall various bald-faced attempts by corporations to buy up public water utilities from cash-starved municipalities. We lost some of those battles and for-profit water systems soon became more of a reality to contend with, as rates increased and services were cut. Nowadays, blatant attempts to privatize water infrastructure are rare in Canada. The public recognizes the threat and quickly mobilizes against it. But the privatization virus hasn't gone away. Adapting to survive, like other viruses do, it has mutated into schemes like Public Private Partnerships (P3s) that

allow the private sector to extract profit from operating, financing, building, and owning our critical infrastructure.

Becoming a Blue Community offers some vaccine-like protection against the virus of water privatization. A Blue Community adopts a water commons framework that treats water as a common good that is shared by everyone and the responsibility of all.

Our Blue Communities Project encourages municipalities and other kinds of communities to embrace the following principles through the passing of resolutions or similarly relevant commitments that:

1. Recognize water and sanitation as human rights,
2. Ban the sale of bottled water in facilities and events controlled by the community, and
3. Promote publicly financed, owned, and operated water services.

There are now more than 100 Blue Communities that have been designated worldwide. Most of the designated communities in Canada are municipalities, including Vancouver, London, and Montreal, but we have also designated many faith congregations, university campuses, and colleges as Blue Communities.

It is critically important to take proactive steps to protect our water commons. Too often, privatization schemes appear "out of nowhere" at municipal council. But if that municipal council has already gone through the process of deliberating a Blue Community designation, it will have had

To learn more about the Blue Community Program, check out the resources on our website:

**Canadians.org/
BlueCommunities**

The University of St. Michael's College achieved the designation of Blue Community in April, at an event featuring Maude Barlow, founding member and former chairperson of the Council of Canadians. She is pictured here along with the Council's current Chairperson John Cartwright (far left) and Water Campaigner Mark Calzavara (far right).
Photo courtesy of St. Michael's College.



plenty of time and opportunity to examine the advantages of adopting a water commons framework.

That means that when the issue of privatizing water arises, the community is already prepared.

Passing a resolution does not legally bind a council in any way but it is powerful nevertheless: we have never had cause to remove any Blue Community designation in the ten years since the program started.

Often, local activists and community groups work together to educate their municipal council and the public about the importance of rejecting privatization, respecting the human right to water, and banning the sale of bottled water. If you will forgive the mixing of metaphors, the Blue Community Project acts as a kind of nucleus for local organizing, bringing people together to work with common cause—and we need a lot more of that! As with so many worthwhile endeavors, the journey is as important as the destination. **CP**

Mark Calzavara is a Water Campaigner at the Council of Canadians.

**IF YOU WANT TO WORK TOWARDS
A BLUE COMMUNITY DESIGNATION
WHERE YOU DRINK THE WATER
(WHERE YOU LIVE), GET IN TOUCH!**

I can help you develop a plan and find other folks you can work with to make it happen. Email me at mcalzavara@canadians.org.



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