

Toronto Water Watch

c/o The Council of Canadians ▪ 100 Bain Avenue, #3 Oaks ▪ Toronto, Ontario M4K 1E8

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Open Letter to Toronto City Council

Toronto Water Watch is a growing coalition of environmental, social and labour groups that have come together in the wake of the Walkerton tragedy to ensure that our local water supply, delivery system and wastewater system remain safe, secure, high-quality and sustainable for the future. Our coalition believes the best way to ensure that these objectives can be met is to keep water and wastewater systems firmly in direct public control.

Water is of immeasurable importance to Canada's environment, economy, public health and identity. Canada's rivers, lakes and groundwater have shaped our history, powered our industrial development, sustained our health and nourished our spirits.

Nevertheless, we can no longer take water for granted. In a world of increasing water scarcity, the many factors that threaten water quality and aquatic ecosystem health in Ontario are growing. Must we now add the danger of losing public control of water resources and management to these concerns?

The people of Toronto have historically enjoyed high quality water and wastewater services as a result of a publicly accountable system, and the contribution of city workers and the city's residents. We question the need to spend resources to examine alternative service delivery models for a system that works well and may be one of the best city systems in North America! In a time when drinking water safety and security is such a concern, we need to be investing in strengthened local security and emergency responses for our systems.

We are perplexed that Toronto City Councillors and staff are considering transferring Toronto's water and wastewater systems from direct municipal control to a public utility. Politicians quoted in a Globe and Mail report describe this shift as "contracting out" and bringing in "private operators". These same private operators have been providing lots of unsolicited advice about how to divest water systems from the City.

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Senior departmental staff claim that the City's water system *will be transferred to a public utility in the next year and a half*, and those same senior staff expect to hold senior positions in that public utility.

We are concerned from these reports that the creation of a "public utility" is quite the opposite – a cover for privatizing water operations by handing over public systems to a corporation to operate for profit. Toronto Water Watch will be educating Council and the public about the potential costs in accountability, control, quality, safety, security and the price of water operations in any arrangement other than direct public service delivery.

We are disturbed that in the wake of the tragedies in Walkerton and North Battleford, and before the Walkerton Inquiry has even finished hearing testimony, Toronto Councillors and staff are considering divesting water from public control. What problem do you think needs to be addressed in this way and why?

The public expects City Councillors to be directly accountable for the delivery of municipal services. Your experience with municipal boards and commissions has shown you that public utilities are not as accountable as an elected council. Private operators are not in the direct control of the public or elected representatives. They are accountable first to their shareholders.

Water is a fundamental human right, and a public trust to be guarded by all levels of government. Therefore, it should not be commodified, privatized or traded for commercial purposes. These rights must be enshrined at all levels of government.

We submit that the City of Toronto should recognize the following principles to ensure the future well-being of the citizens of Toronto:

- An adequate supply of clean water for people's daily living needs is a basic human right.
- It is wrong – environmentally, economically and morally – to engage in the large-scale trade of water. Water must not be regarded as a commodity for exchange in the international marketplace. Adequate supplies of clean water for people in water-scarce regions can only be ensured by promoting conservation and protection of local water resources. Importing water is not an economically or environmentally sustainable strategy for dealing with water scarcity.

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- Water is the lifeblood of the environment as well as an essential resource for humans. Each generation must ensure that the abundance and quality of water is not diminished as a result of its activities. Greater efforts must be made to restore the health of aquatic ecosystems that have already been degraded as well as to protect others from harm.
- Proper handling of water and sewage are essential to public security and public health.
- The right to high quality water and wastewater services is best ensured by keeping water and sewage services in the public sector, by ensuring facilities are constructed and maintained by appropriately skilled workers, by regulating the protection of water supplies and by promoting the efficient use of water.
- Water is a public trust. All Canadians have the right and the responsibility to be involved in the major decision affecting water in Canada.

Accessibility to water and water services, water quality, environmental protection and conservation, accountability to the public and public involvement, and adequate and fair financing of water systems are all jeopardized or compromised by privatization. Clearly, the public senses these dangers. Polls show that a large majority of respondents want public ownership and operation of water facilities.

We believe that we can prove to you that there is no validity to the financial, managerial, technological or regulatory arguments commonly put forward to justify water privatization. Toronto, as the largest city in Canada has a distinct advantage in financing, retaining and upgrading its water systems. Expert submissions to Part II of the Walkerton Inquiry have demonstrated that:

- Municipalities are more capable of financing water system infrastructure at better rates of interest than are the private sector.
- Municipalities are just as capable of running efficient operations as are private companies – if not more so, given that they need not factor in profit margins.
- Municipalities have or can obtain as much access to expertise and new technologies as private companies.

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- Finally, public ownership and operation ensures that public accountability and control can be maximized.

Together, these factors mean that the interest and needs of the public are best promoted with public water systems, including their interest in having access to safe, secure, high-quality drinking water.

We call on City Councillors to recognize the strengths and value of our current public water and wastewater services and stop looking at creating new entities that move public services further away from public scrutiny. Let's make a good system even better. Why do anything else?

Sincerely,

Toronto Water Watch

A Coalition of The Council of Canadians, Toronto Civic Employees Union – Local 416 – Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canadian Union of Public Employees – Local 79, Canadian Environmental Law Association, Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Metro Network for Social Justice, Toronto-Central Ontario Construction Trades Council, Toronto Environmental Alliance, Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy

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