



LESSONS LEARNED:

ACTIVIST GROUP COUNCIL OF CANADIANS PUSHES MEANINGLESS BLUE COMMUNITY DESIGNATION AS CITIES' WATER CHALLENGES ACCUMULATE

At a time when communities across America need water infrastructure investments and expertise, an activist group called the Council of Canadians is pushing for these communities to ban all engagements with water professionals and go it alone.

That's right: the Council of Canadians wants American cities and towns to become "Blue Communities" – and pledge to never work with the private sector to provide water and wastewater services. In late 2019, the City of Los Angeles became the first "Blue Community" in the United States and should serve as a cautionary tale for other communities that may consider following suit.ⁱ

So, what is this Canadian-based activist group really up to? It's worth a closer look.

WHAT IS A BLUE COMMUNITY?

The "Blue Community" designation is an invention of activists at the Council of Canadians to try to get local governments to ban any private sector involvement in the delivery of their water services – now and forever.ⁱⁱ The pledge specifically says that the city must "promote publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services," leaving no room for leveraging private sector investment and expertise, and taking proven water and wastewater solutions off the table.

Based in Ottawa, Canada, the Council of Canadians advocates against "economic globalization and unregulated market capitalism"ⁱⁱⁱ and explicitly supports "non-violent civil disobedience" as an advocacy tactic.^{iv} One of the Council's founding members and its current Honorary Chair is Maude Barlow, a vociferous opponent of the private sector.^v Barlow is also the Board Chair of the Washington, D.C.-based activist group Food & Water Watch.

WHAT DOES BEING A BLUE COMMUNITY ACTUALLY MEAN FOR WATER SYSTEMS AND RESIDENTS?

Nothing, really. The "Blue Community" designation does not provide any funding, expertise, or other resources for water systems. In fact, by banning any work with the private sector on water and wastewater services, the "Blue Community" designation actually blocks access to funding, expertise, and other valuable resources.

It is especially perplexing that Los Angeles would be the first and only American city to pursue the "Blue Community" designation, given that its water and wastewater systems have recently faced enormous challenges and failures, and that its water department is currently under FBI investigation.

Consider:

In September 2018, the EPA finalized an administrative order with the city over federal Clean Water Act violations. As part of the order, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) had to pay a \$94,000 penalty and purchase \$5.3 million in mitigation credits to offset the damage it had done to a local wetland.^{vi}

LADWP has also struggled to maintain compliance with drinking water quality standards in recent years, accumulating three formal enforcement actions and multiple treatment technique violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act since 2016.^{vii}

The reliability of the city's infrastructure has also been a concern. In 2014, a massive water main break flooded the UCLA campus, resulting in \$13 million in damage.^{viii} A 2018 main break in South Los Angeles created a sinkhole that swallowed up several vehicles and displaced almost 50 residents.^{ix}

In June 2019, the FBI raided LADWP offices as part of an investigation into improper billing practices. As the Los Angeles Times reported at the time, LADWP's leadership was "mired in a controversy" as investigators pursued evidence of "a wide array of possible crimes, including bribery, kickbacks, extortion, mail fraud and money laundering."^x

Despite all of this trouble, the Council of Canadians ignored LADWP's failures and pinned a gold star on the city's water and wastewater services – simply because the city declared itself opposed to private sector involvement to help improve those vital services.

Declaring that there is no scenario in which LADWP would ever consider working with a water company is dangerously shortsighted. Clearly Los Angeles has much more it should be concerned about when it comes to its water system management than whether it has a meaningless "Blue Community" designation.

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WHAT DOES BEING A BLUE COMMUNITY ACTUALLY MEAN FOR WATER SYSTEMS AND RESIDENTS?

The "Blue Community" designation is simply a tactical maneuver by anti-water company activists to spread their blindly ideological opposition to proven, private sector solutions for municipal water and wastewater services. Los Angeles proves that being a "Blue Community" does nothing to assure residents that their water is safe and reliable and that the system's management is sound.

Like Food & Water Watch, the Council of Canadians is not interested in bringing solutions to communities facing water challenges, but rather only aims to oppose all solutions involving the private sector, no matter how proven, beneficial, or needed.

Sources

ⁱ ABC 7, "Los Angeles becomes first 'Blue Community' in the country" 6 November 2019.

ⁱⁱ The Blue Planet Project, "The Blue Communities Project" accessed 17 February 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Council of Canadians, "About Us" accessed 17 February 2020.

^{iv} Council of Canadians, "About Us" accessed 17 February 2020.

^v Council of Canadians, "Maude Barlow" accessed 17 February 2020.

^{vi} U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "U.S. EPA reaches agreement with Los Angeles Department of Water and Power over damage to wetlands" 5 September 2018.

^{vii} U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ECHO Database, City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, accessed 17 February 2020.

^{viii} The Los Angeles Times, "UCLA claims \$13 million in flood damage from water line break" 9 July 2015.

^{ix} ABC 7, "24-inch pipe bursts in South Los Angeles, creating sinkhole and flooding streets" 21 December 2018.

^x Los Angeles Times, "FBI raids at DWP, L.A. City Hall related to fallout from billing debacle" 22 July 2019.