THE FIGHT TO PRESERVE WATER AS A PUBLIC GOOD

What’s The Problem With Our Current System?

Since the 18th century, municipally-controlled drinking and wastewater systems across the United States have proved fundamental in supporting urban expansion and meeting a growing population’s most basic needs. As local governments invested more in developing these critical systems, water systems were viewed not only as necessities in tackling infectious diseases and public health crises that plagued our cities, but also as markers of economic opportunity and prosperity.

Despite their strong public support over the past two centuries, water systems in the U.S. are now at a moment of critical need. Many systems have century-old lead and cast iron pipes that need to be replaced to ensure that Americans have access to safe public drinking water in our homes, schools, and businesses. Demand for water is only increasing alongside population growth. A changing climate is placing new stressors on our drinking and wastewater systems. Overall, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that updating water systems across the United States have proved fundamental in tackling infectious diseases and public health crises that plagued our cities.

The public water sector--expand demand for water privatization; the promise of enriching shareholders while serving the public industry and their Wall Street partners to move away from public

Over the past several decades, public officials have faced declines in funding alongside mounting pressure from the private water industry and their Wall Street partners to move away from public operations and toward the false solution of water privatization. But the promise of enriching shareholders while serving the public has proven to be false time and time again. The private water industry is inherently structured to weaken its greatest competitor -- the public water sector--expand demand for water privatization; and remove as many obstacles as possible to the profitability of its operations. These three goals are prioritized over other considerations, including the sustainability of the national water sector, the safety of those consuming this water, and the quality and accountability of local water systems.

Water privatization has led to labor cuts and abuses, serious health and safety violations, dangerous cost cutting that puts public health in jeopardy, and failure to invest in necessary infrastructure upgrades.

Public Spending on Transportation & Water Infrastructure, by Level of Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Federal</th>
<th>State and Local Governments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>68</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Congressional Budget Office (2018). Public Spending on Transportation and Water Infrastructure

Despite whatever it is packaged as, ratepayers are hit hard when water systems are privatized. Why? Public utilities use rates to pay for operating and capital expenses, like upgrades to infrastructure and service delivery. Private utilities also carry these expenses, with the added expense of paying out shareholders. Privatized water systems typically charge 59 percent more for water service than local government utilities. And if that water system is controlled by a private equity firm, ratepayers should expect even higher bills. Above all, privatized water systems must deliver superior shareholder return–even during crises, and even during a pandemic.

What Impact Does This Have on our Communities?

Privatization schemes have all too often left low income communities and communities of color behind, or worse off. Once they are locked into these contracts communities of color, low-income communities, and non-English-speaking communities are frequently left out of decision-making around water system governance under these arrangements, exacerbating existing inequities. As water systems are privatized, transparency and accountability to residents in decision-making decline. While residents may have a direct line to government officials charged with running public water systems, residents don’t have a voice at the shareholders’ meetings or headquarters of private water corporations. Moreover, residents do not have the power to vote out a private operator if their needs are not being met.

And just like the privatization of schools, hospitals and other public services, the privatization of water systems also threatens the stability of workers. Privatization strips unionized workers of their collective bargaining powers. Because private water companies are not obligated to recognize the union during a transfer of ownership, workers are not afforded the same protections in their workplace or the ability to advocate for themselves through contract negotiations. And in some cases, workers may be presented with layoffs that allow the company to cut costs and drive up profits. Preserving water as a public good protects not only the public health, but the democratic and economic vitality of our communities.

How Do We Fight Back?

We MUST Pass the WATER Act. The WATER Act is the most comprehensive approach to improving our water systems and helping ensure that every person has access to safe and clean water in the United States. We need a major federal investment in our public water infrastructure to renovate our nation’s old water pipes. The WATER Act will simultaneously deliver water justice to the millions of people in the United States who lack access to safe water, while creating nearly a million jobs.

We MUST Ban Water Shutoffs Because of Inability to Pay. Access to safe drinking water is critical in protecting public health. In the face of the Coronavirus, many cities and states issued moratoriums on water disconnection. Voluntary moratoriums are important, but mandatory moratoriums ensure every household has access to water - during and after the pandemic ends.
Sources:


6. Ibid, 4

7. Ibid, 4


12. Ibid, 11