

Blue Community Project

Background

The Blue Community project, begun in 2009, is jointly supported by the Council of Canadians , Blue Planet Project and CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees). The purpose of the Blue Community is to recognize municipalities that take three steps which enshrine water as a common resource (like air, necessary for life), requiring safe keeping and accessibility . Water is agreed to be a public trust with public interests having priority over private for-profit interests.

Request for consideration of the program for London was made on May 02, 2018 to the Advisory Committee on the Environment by Julie Pickens-Cooper of the London branch of the Council of Canadians. To become a Blue Community the following resolutions are passed :

Resolution 1: water is and sanitation are recognized as a human right

Resolution 2: sale of bottled water in municipal facilities and events is phased out or banned

Resolution 3: promote publicly owned and operated water and waste water services

The recommendation that followed – That the Civic Administration BE REQUESTED to report back to the appropriate committee with respect to the feasibility of implementing the Blue Communities Program in London: it being noted that the Advisory Committee on the Environment received a verbal presentation from J.Pickens-Cooper with respect to this matter.

A City staff response was directed to the Civic Works Committee March 18, 2019 with the following action (<https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=63261>).

That, on the recommendation of the Managing Director, Environmental and Engineering Services and City Engineer, the report dated March 18,2019 with respect to the Council Of Canadians' Blue Communities Project and its application to the City of London BE RECEIVED for information. (2019-E08)

This was directed back to the ACE on the April 2019 agenda with staff responses. It was noted that many of the City's existing operations and programs align with the Blue Community resolutions however changes to core business processes were seen to be required to fully comply. In particular, Blue Community literature states that:

“If a municipality has a policy that cuts off a resident's water or waste water services, this

would go against the human rights to water and sanitation resolution and the municipality would not be eligible to become a Blue Community”.

With respect to resolution 1 - Staff note that service disconnection is used as a last resort with water bills severely in arrears. They also referred to the Customer Assistance Programs which assists residents struggling to pay for water services and that in 2017 and 2018 there had been no such cuts to services. Staff recommended a feasibility review in order to meet the requirements of Blue Communities and to understand the financial implications of the initiative. This could include contacting other Blue Communities.

With respect to resolution 2 , the phasing out or banning of bottled water at city sites, staff noted that this policy already exists. They added that vendors at events are encouraged to not sell bottled water when the Thirstmobile and Thirststations are present but that this could be more fully enforced.

With respect to resolution 3, promotion of public ownership of water services, staff noted that the City of London water and waste water systems and the Lake Huron and Elgin Area Primary Water Supply Systems are publicly financed, owned and operated. Thus Resolution 3 can be met without changes to existing operations.

Next Steps

The Chair of the London Blue Communities Committee for the Council of Canadians is Lynn Brown. On behalf of the project she and her colleagues want to reopen consideration of the Blue Community designation for London.

To date, (January, 2020), 52 municipalities around the globe have decided the Blue Community designation is in their interests. These include Bayfield, Kingston, Niagara Falls, Paris, Brussels, Berlin and most recently Los Angeles. In addition, 16 communities have made this commitment including the Sisters of St. Joseph here in London. (Please see list of Blue Communities attached, Appendix A).

We recognize the City’s forward thinking in declaring environmental crisis as reality and having this lens for future planning . We further recognize the City’s declaration of housing as a human right. We maintain that becoming a Blue Community is in accord with these values and would offer a degree of protection in the future of the public trust of water services when it could be anticipated that there will be greater pressure on water resources . This could include pressure to privatize water services as has happened in Australia, parts of Europe, U.S. etc. (Please see Appendix B re negative effects of privatization of water resources.)

The major concern noted by City staff appeared to be around declaration of water as a human right and the commitment to refrain from cutting off water services due to struggles to pay. We note that this is not a major problem due to the Customer Assistance Program managed by the City and its partners. It is

possible that this may suffice to meet the meaning of resolution #1 . The fact that water shut offs have not occurred in 2017 and 2018 suggest the City is acting with recognition of the human right to water.

We ask that :

the City staff explore the feasibility of making this commitment through contact with other Blue Community municipalities. We offer that Bayfield , a Blue Community since 2011, has not reported water shut offs (Council of Canadians , national office). No Blue Communities have lost their designation due to a change in water bill payment patterns. We also offer that Welland deals with unpaid water bills by attaching the arrears to property taxes, a possible solution for those who can afford to pay. We offer that Nanaimo did complete such a feasibility study before becoming a Blue Community.

Resolution 2- phasing out /banning sale of bottled water at City facilities and events has already been decided in 2009. The City has measures in place to provide flowing water and staff indicate this could be more fully upheld. We appreciate the staff ideas re encouraging third party vendors to respect this commitment. We offer that a campaign to “bring your own” could be helpful. The emission effects of producing plastic bottles and the reality of 1/9 recycling success are well known. The proliferation of water born plastics is another. We note also, an encouraging example at the Boys and Girls Club. The fountain there installed 2 years ago tracks water use in bottle equivalency. They record the equivalent of 68,000 bottles NOT USED by the seniors, children and staff who use the fountain and reuse mugs and bottles.

We ask that:

The City campaign for a ‘bring your own” water bottle culture at City events and facilities in keeping with the recognition of the climate emergency. Further , we ask that water refill stations be further expanded in the city.

Resolution 3- promotion of public ownership and operation of water services. London is already in compliance with this resolution and it is understood that Ontario has strict legislation regarding drinking water with attendant liabilities making private ownership of these services unattractive to private interests at present (Municipal Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, etc.)

We ask that:

The City make this resolution with which it is compliance in practice.

Conclusions

London is well placed to seek the Blue Community designation and thereby set in place a level of protection for the future. The values and intents of the Blue Community policy appear aligned with those of our city. London has recognized a climate crisis and will plan with the climate lens henceforth. London has recognized housing as a human right. London makes every effort to support water delivery which should also be upheld as a human right. London has already banned the sale of single use bottled water at it’s sites and events. London’s water service is already in the public domain.

Taking the remaining steps to seek Blue Community designation would be another declaration of London's forward thinking and intent to position as a progressive city, an attractive destination for like-minded business, students and residents in the future economy.