

ENERGY CONCERNS: MUNICIPAL WATER SUPPLIES



First it was plastic bags. Now water bottles are the new faux pas

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London, Ont., could become one of the first cities in Canada to stop selling bottled water in municipal buildings as a growing consumer backlash against the product takes hold across the country.

London's city council is set to vote tonight on a proposal to eliminate the sales of bottled water in all city-run buildings, arenas and community centres, and many expect it will be approved.

The issue has sparked a heated debate in the city over the past several months and highlights a growing movement against the plastic bottles.

The backlash against bottled water has been quietly brewing among environmentalists as well as consumers who are concerned by the amount of energy it takes to transport the bottles, and by how much waste they produce, especially considering that most areas of Canada have safe, high-quality municipal water supplies.

Like the plastic bag before it, bottled water is quickly becoming the new battleground in the fight to reduce waste and help the environment.

Many communities and school boards across Canada are now considering restrictions on their sale.

Unlike other bottled drinks, such as juice and pop, water has been singled out by environmentalists because it is seen as an unnecessary product that produces a significant amount of waste.

Municipal water systems in Canada are constantly inspected, and the country's tap water supply is generally of high quality, which means there is no need to waste resources shipping bottles to consumers throughout the country, said William Rees, professor of ecological economics in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia.

In fact, two of the most popular brands - Dasani and Aquafina - use water from municipal water supplies in Canada.

Furthermore, while the bottles can be recycled, the process consumes a great amount of energy, and a significant portion of bottles are often thrown in the garbage and end up in landfills, Prof. Rees said.

"It's a completely unnecessary addition to the shopping basket to purchase bottled water," he said. "I think people ought to wake up. Consumers are pretty gullible."

Canada's per capita consumption of bottled water jumped from 28.4 litres in 1998 to 66 litres in 2006, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation. Nearly three in 10 households said they drank bottled water at home in 2006, according to Statistics Canada.

But there are signs the tide is turning against bottled water. In addition to London, a number of communities, including Kitchener, Ont., Charlottetown, St. John's, Vancouver and Nelson, B.C., as well as major school boards in Toronto and Ottawa, have either moved forward with plans to eliminate bottled water sales, or are considering such restrictions.

In London, the issue has stirred up significant debate. If city council votes in favour of the proposed restrictions, bottled water will no longer be sold at city hall, or at other municipal buildings, starting Sept. 1. After that, bottles will also be phased out of other city-run facilities, such as hockey arenas and community centres, over a period of months, as long as the buildings have adequate water fountains. Next spring, the city will examine how it can improve access to tap water at golf courses in order to phase out the sale of bottled water.

London's proposal has sparked heated objections from the bottled water industry, which argues the idea of restrictions doesn't make sense.

Gail Cosman, president of Nestlé Waters Canada, issued a statement saying: "We do not believe [the restrictions] will effectively encourage increased consumption of tap water or decrease plastic beverage container litter on city-owned property."

Bottled water is an alternative for people who would otherwise drink sugary juices or carbonated beverages and does not discourage people from drinking tap water, the company said. But the dissenting voices haven't gained much traction at London's city hall, where a council committee voted in favour of the restrictions last week.

"Years ago, the water fountain was all over the place and we didn't have bottled water," said Jay Stanford, the city's director of environmental programs and solid waste. "I think our society gets caught up in convenience too much. Eventually, you've got to begin to put on the brakes and ask people to think."

While the bottled water industry largely opposes such restrictions, the backlash against bottled water is being embraced as a potential business opportunity by water filtration companies.

Brita Canada Corp. recently launched a campaign to encourage Canadians to ditch plastic bottles. The company created a website, Filterforgood.ca, which invites people to take a pledge to give up bottled water as a way to eliminate environmental waste.

Another company, Vaughan-based Forefront Homespring Inc., recently launched "T-Eau", tap water that has gone through an intensive purifying process to remove all bacteria.

The filtration system is being marketed to restaurants in Toronto as an environmentally friendly alternative to bottled water.

"In a country like Canada, for the most part ... bottled water is completely unnecessary," Prof. Rees said. "To say it's a pure rip-off to the consumer is an understatement."

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