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Op-Ed: Customers will rue the day Bucks County sold its sewer system

By Robert C. Bender

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The North Wales Water Authority strongly opposes the privatization of publicly owned and operated water or sewer systems. This includes the proposed sale of the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority's sanitary sewer system.

This same position has been held by most, if not all, of our industry colleagues, including until recently, our friends at the BCWSA, as has been evidenced by their website and their CEO and PR staff publicly espousing the same position for many years.

After touting the many benefits of public ownership for decades, the sudden change in direction by the BCWSA is, to say the least, puzzling. The only reason for changing their position at this time appears obvious.

We hope that the decisionmakers at the BCWSA and the Bucks County Board of Commissioners reconsider the path now being followed, and that the BCWSA continues to operate the sewer system, and remains a business associate and valued customer of the NWWA for many years.

We believe that our public water systems and aquifers are much too important to allow these facilities to fall under the influences of Wall Street. Similarly, we believe that the environmental protections inherent in having local operations and control of sewer systems is equally important.

The record of corporate ownership is clear and consistent, and it typically results in little more than much higher rates to the consumers.

Our position is that essential public utilities such as water and sewer systems should be held in perpetual public ownership and trust, so that these facilities and assets can be passed on to our children, our grandchildren, and future generations.

The protection of local water resources and the environment should be non-negotiable — and not for sale to the highest bidder. This can best be accomplished by maintaining public ownership and having utility operators who answer directly to the public — not to a corporately controlled board of directors.

In this case, our position is that the future ownership and operation of the BCWSA sanitary sewer systems is much too important to allow the utility to be bought, sold and, possibly, traded for profit.

There is nothing that the proposed for-profit owner can do that the BCWSA can not do. All the customers will see is a higher bill for their services. They will still flush and the sewage will still go away to be properly treated.

As both publicly and privately operated utility systems must adhere to identical water quality and sewer discharge criteria, there is no public advantage to privatization.

According to their annual reports and financial statements, the BCWSA is not fiscally distressed. They have a well-trained and qualified staff, and they answer to the public locally. They do their job well and can do anything the private company can do — maybe even better.

The only real difference is that public entities operate on a non-profit basis, as opposed to the private utilities, which must impose never-ending rate increases to produce continual profits for their investors.

We believe that the residents of Bucks and Montgomery counties directly impacted by a sale resulting in significantly and perpetually increasing rates will not only regret the day that the proposed sale is finalized, but will also long remember all responsible parties.

Robert C. Bender is the executive director of the North Wales Water Authority, which serves 16 communities in Bucks and Montgomery counties.

