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Sewage decision takes center stage at Victoria's World Water Day

VICTORIA – World Water Day celebrations took place in Victoria's historic Alix Goolden Hall on March 19.

Ken Kelly, General Manager of the Downtown Victoria Business Association, acted as Master of Ceremonies. Kelly welcomed close to 150 people to an evening of thought-provoking perspectives and information. The event featured a panel presentation focused on how communities in Canada and around the globe are dealing with key water issues, sewage issues and environmental issues.

David Boys, an international expert on water and sewage utilities and a member of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, said that experience shows that private solutions don't work. "The private sector is not a magic bullet for dealing with water or sanitation needs. It is simply not the case, as some government and corporations promise, that the private sector will be cheaper and more responsive."

Boys encouraged everyone, including elected officials, to take advantage of the enormous opportunity in the CRD to implement world-class sewage treatment with resource recovery programs as part of a well-run, integrated public utility.

Speaking on the link between protecting the environment and keeping services public, Gwen Barlee from the Western Canada Wilderness Committee said that the public interest and the ecological bottom line should not be sacrificed for a corporate bottom line. "Corporate control and priorities are often at odds with our priorities of public accountability and environmental stewardship," said Barlee.

Cliff White offered advice from his experience as an activist in the Halifax community's fight against private sewage treatment. "In the end, the public interest won and Halifax has a public system. But we paid a high price for going through the long and grueling process of considering privatization," says White. "Rather than focusing on the best technology and the right approach, the main agenda was that of the private company – Suez. Don't let your community discussion and decision be guided by the priorities of the private corporations."

World Water Day grew out of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro and is celebrated around the world. The Victoria event was sponsored by the Greater Victoria Water Watch Coalition, in partnership with CUPE, the Council of Canadians, the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, Oxfam Canada, and the Victoria Labour Council.