

WHISTLER CHAPTER FIGHTS THE STENCH OF PRIVATIZATION

by Carleen Pickard

Just mention the town of Whistler, B.C., and images of fresh powder, alpine lodges and après-ski aperitifs come to mind. Who would have thought that the less-than-sexy issue of sewage treatment would bring together some of the strongest hearts and minds in the community and inspire them to form one of the Council's latest, most fiery chapters?

In January residents got a whiff of the news that the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) intended to privatize the town's wastewater treatment plant. Talks had been going on for two years, but the community had not been consulted on the process. Few knew that the municipality was about to vote on accepting corporate bids for a public-private partnership (P3) to upgrade and run the wastewater plant.

A small group of community members didn't like the smell of privatization. They swiftly formed a Council of Canadians chapter, and organized the Whistler Water Watch coalition, bringing together concerned citizens, union members and other social justice activists.

Within days, they had researched everything they could get their hands on – the sewage treatment plant, the problems with P3s in other communities, and public approaches to wastewater management. Within an eight-day period, the chapter presented RMOW members with a petition signed by over 500 Whistler residents, demanding that a moratorium be placed on the P3 process until a public meeting was held.

"It has been amazing to see the local community banding together to fight this P3. When we first started the educa-

tion process, most Whistlerites had never heard of P3s or considered that wastewater could be privatized or profited from," said Pina Belperio, co-founder of the Whistler chapter.

When the town council decided to hold an "open house" designed to sell the P3 project to the community, Belperio and her fellow activists were not satisfied with a one-sided presentation. Whistler chapter members set up a "soap box" in the centre of the room and took over the evening. They stood atop the box and warned the audience about the dangers of water privatization.

"Clearly, the people of this town had something to say about the selling off of their public utilities," said Belperio.



Carleen Pickard, BC/Yukon Regional Organizer (left), poses with Pete Davidson of CUPE and Pina Belperio of the Whistler chapter.

At press time, Whistler Water Watch had already gathered over 1,400 signatures on a petition – enough to force the RMOW to hold a referendum on the issue.

Whistler chapter members prove that all it takes is a handful of committed citizens to make a difference in their community. And if they win the current battle, Whistler's water will be in better hands due to their efforts.

Carleen Pickard is The Council of Canadians' BC/Yukon Regional Organizer.

FREDERICTON CHAPTER WORKS WITH CAMPUS GROUPS TO DRAW A CROWD

by Angela Giles

The Underground Café, a popular meeting spot for several Fredericton activist groups, is also the location of choice for the local Council of Canadians chapter. This is where

Angela Vardy and Douglas Mullen have held the majority of Fredericton chapter meetings for the past two years. Since the majority of chapter members are students in St. Thomas University's social work department, the group considers themselves a campus-based chapter.

"It's very difficult to attract new members in such a conservative town," says Vardy. "Although they're more cyclical,

university students tend to be more open and interested in participating in our chapter's activities."

When Maude Barlow spoke at St. Thomas University last fall, the chapter partnered with the student union to publicize and promote the event. Over 400 people packed the auditorium. Lots of Council materials were distributed and several new members signed up to get involved with the chapter.

One measure of success for the chapter is "a large number of people in attendance that we don't know," says Vardy. "We do lots of 'preaching to the choir,' which is good, but I like to see lots of new faces in the crowd to know that we're reaching out to the larger community."

Angela Giles is The Council of Canadians' Atlantic Regional Assistant.