



OPINION

# It's time to repeal the Pa. law that allows the sale of municipal water systems | Editorial

Officials in Bucks County were absolutely right not to sell their system to a private company. Now, lawmakers must reverse the measure known as Act 12.



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Ginny Marcille-Kerslake, an organizer with Food and Water Watch and David McMahon, of Neighbors Opposing Privatization Efforts, during rally opposing the privatization ... [Read more](#)

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by The Editorial Board  
Published 5 hours ago

The Bucks County commissioners were correct to [cancel](#) the proposed \$1.1 billion sale of the county's sewer system to a private



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reckless 2016 bill that [opened the door](#) for private companies to gobble up public water and sewer utilities.

The proposed \$1.1 billion sale in Bucks County would have been the [largest privatization](#) of a public wastewater treatment system in the country. While the sale to Aqua Pennsylvania would have generated a one-time windfall for the county coffers, it also would have led to steep increases in sewer bills for consumers for years to come.

Other local governments have sold off their public water and sewer systems only to [regret](#) it as residents have seen their water bills [increase](#) by as much as 98%.

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The main argument from privatization supporters is that it leads to lower prices. But that has not been the case. An exhaustive [study](#) of the 500 largest water systems in the United States found that for-profit water systems charge an average of 58% more than publicly owned ones.

The costs were even higher for residents in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. For-profit systems in Pennsylvania charged 84% more than public systems, while in New Jersey the charges were 79% higher, according to the [study](#) titled “The State of Public Water in the United States,” by Food & Water Watch, a consumer rights organization.



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the demand by 2071.

In many ways, the [water crisis](#) is already here. In addition to the increased demand, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods are wreaking havoc on water systems.

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Witness the 150,000 people [without clean water](#) after floods in Jackson, Miss. Earlier this summer, deadly floods left 25,000 people in Kentucky [without clean water](#), some for weeks. A [water emergency](#) in West Baltimore was recently lifted after E. coli bacteria were found in the water supply.

More than 2 million people in the United States today don't even [have running water](#) — a disgrace in 2022 in the richest country in the world. Access to clean, safe, and affordable water will only worsen as increased demand and climate change stress water systems. Letting profit-driven companies sort out water policy is a recipe for disaster.



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driving governments to unload their water and sewer systems.

Much of the problem stems from the federal government. Federal funding for water utility improvement projects has been slashed for decades. From 1977 to 2014, federal support for water utilities [decreased](#) by 74% even after factoring for inflation. Funding for wastewater treatment has faced even [steeper cuts](#).

President Joe Biden's bipartisan [infrastructure bill](#) provides a good [down payment](#) of \$55 billion to upgrade water systems, [including](#) \$240 million for Pennsylvania. But the Environmental Protection Agency [estimated](#) \$472.6 billion is needed to maintain and improve the nation's drinking-water infrastructure over the next 20 years. So it should come as little surprise that officials are looking for ways to bridge that gap.

Selling off publicly owned water and sewer assets is not the answer. Clean, safe, and affordable water should not be left to the free market.

Published Sept. 18, 2022



The Inquirer Editorial Board [✉](#)

This opinion was written by a group of journalists who work separately from the newsroom to debate matters of public interest.

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