

To the Honorable Mayor Kenney,
City Hall,
Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Re: guaranteeing and promoting safe water for all in the Philadelphia Region.

Philadelphia, January 18, 2017

Dear Mayor Kenney,

We, high school and college students assembled during the Model United Nations Conference on Water Stewardship on MLK Day, write this letter to address policy issues regarding technical, social economic and environmental justice, with a focus on water pollution and corrective measures.

Understanding that water pollution is a worldwide problem, including in Philadelphia, and considering the policy decisions that created a water crisis in Flint Michigan, we write to you about our opinions regarding these problems in our own community.

The problems we address involve rain overflow, pollutants, and flooding. We seek more regulation as well as involvement of block captains and community leaders to promote the conservation of water in their communities and prevent polluting through better waste handling. The solutions we seek are to be affordable and sustainable for everyday life.

We request the city council to host a community meeting of block captains to discuss the development of community workshops for storm water management. We have been informed that some block captains overuse city water for personal use, or show a disregard for this precious resource. Such workshops would be environmentally and economically advantageous both for the individual and their households, and for the city as a whole. At such a meeting, we like to see the discussion focus on the problems of rain water, water pollutants, and how we can decrease storm water runoff using rain barrels and rain gardens. The utilization of local recreation centers as demonstration sites would empower the citizenry at the very local level, giving the program an individual level approach.

As citizens of Philadelphia, we believe we are entitled to safe, clean, and affordable access to drinking water. We also are obliged to live our lives as if water matters. To this end, we propose several steps. Without awareness, improvement goals cannot be met, so education must be an important part of the discussion. Hence, we propose integrating a curriculum on water usage in Philadelphia elementary, middle, and high schools. These lessons will focus on both local and global issues. Potential topics include: watershed education, rain garden projects, educational fieldtrips, and other hands on activities. Additionally, students will be taught about global water problems to create a sense of perspective and greater appreciation of water resources.

While education focuses on individual awareness, it is also important to include our governmental and corporate entities. Philadelphia should consider the utilization of water budgets and employ individual tax incentives as a reward for reduced water usage. If families meet or go below established water

consumption criteria (determined by average per capita water usage), the city can provide tax breaks. The same concept can be applied to large institutional water users.

Pollution also poses a significant threat to our water sources as it breeds bacteria and increases disease risk. A proposed solution to remove physical and chemical waste is to manufacture filters specifically for storm water drains, and assure better upkeep of the current intake points. We believe placing filters throughout the Philadelphia area will improve the quality of our storm water discharge system, all the way to the treatment plants and collection reservoirs such as at Venice Island.

We believe businesses should become more responsible regarding their water intake. To this end, we hope that businesses can be motivated to utilize gray water by providing tax incentives for installing and using gray water systems instead of traditional water disposal methods. Additionally, the city of Philadelphia should tax items that are water intensive and other luxury commodities including private pools and lawn sprinkler systems. Most directly, the city itself should do away with any sprinkler system, if any, on any of its parks and gardens.

Moreover, and regarding the experiences of our brothers and sisters in Flint Michigan, we demand greater transparency and accessibility from both local and state governments in regards to water quality testing specifically in areas that rely on lead pipes and older infrastructure. The government should make all records public and prohibit the deletion of past records. It's OUR water that we are drinking; we should have the right to know the quality of what we are drinking.

Water is the most basic human right. While this fact is true, not all Americans can afford water as delivered by companies or service agencies. As citizens of the United States of America, we have a duty to help each other and especially those of very young and old age. As a matter of principle, we students of Philadelphia believe that those who can afford to pay should assist those who cannot afford water. We seek a tax-payer funded Water Bank, akin to a Food Assistance program, so that higher income citizens will contribute a bit more money in order that people who are not financially able can keep having access to clean, safe water.

Community service projects raise awareness in tackling socio-economic issues pertaining to water contaminants and waste management. Raising awareness about such important water pertaining issues and starting social movements at the community-level is important. Captains or regional leaders in a community should seek and hold the responsibility for waste management initiatives along with civilians. Taking note of such projects in other cities and towns such as Bamenda in Cameroon, we envision bi-weekly clean-ups to prevent water becoming heavily contaminated; also, setting up demonstration rain barrels in neighborhoods can be a start. Getting local pharmacies and health centers to become active collectors of unused medications and medical equipment should be made a priority. It will take but a few steps to organize a city-wide movement and have members of each neighborhood designated as water and waste stewards for their community. Moreover, as communication technology progresses exponentially, engaged (young) citizens can use social media platforms to reach the larger community.

Lastly, environmental contamination affecting low income communities can be partly attributed to the refusal of many companies and contractors to follow and meet regulation standards. To deter these detrimental actions, regulations should be introduced to becoming stricter to deter companies from harming the environment. In addition, fines for offenses against these regulations should be increased significantly to further dissuade such companies. In combination with the increase in both regulations and fines, and akin to our well-seen Parking Authority personnel, there should be overseers assigned to maintain order through field tests and checks. Again, CCTV cameras can be a great asset in enforcing our waste regulation laws.

Finally, local officials should make their actions around water and waste more transparent and be accountable for them. We see an annual report card as a proper method to make Water Awareness a strategic topic for each governmental agency. The analysis of these report cards should be a task of your office of Sustainability. We expect that the Philadelphia Water Department can play an essential role in dissemination of their findings.

Sincerely and respectfully signed

(see attached list of signatories)

P.S. this letter was composed based on rough drafts that were discussed and agreed upon during the conference. All signatories have seen this text and agreed with the content and formulation. An electronic version is available.