
Thirsting for Profits

A Background Check on the
Corporations Vying to Take Over
Stockton's Water Systems

A special report by

Public Citizen's

Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program
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Fortune magazine recently called water “the oil of the 21st century.” With a deepening global water crisis already imperiling the lives of hundreds of millions of people, private companies are presenting themselves to government agencies as knights in shining armor coming to the rescue by purchasing rickety water systems, whipping them back into shape, and ensuring that the tap won’t run dry — all this, while saving taxpayer money.

Riding into Stockton are four corporations that, based on their checkered histories, have local citizens girding themselves for what is shaping up to be one of the ugliest political battles in recent memory. As more unseemly information about these companies has come to light, residents of Stockton are starting to wonder who, if anybody, is looking out for their interests. The answer might be one they don’t want to hear: Nobody.

Last year, Stockton stepped onto the treacherous path of water, wastewater and stormwater privatization after Mayor Gary Podesto suggested that hiring a private company to operate and repair the city’s systems would save money and keep rates down.

Since 1998, Stockton’s Municipal Utility District has been able to stabilize rates by increasing efficiency and lowering costs. The agency has estimated that the savings would yield enough money to bankroll infrastructure repairs and expansion over the next 10 years. However, some unexpected costs may drive up rates, which the city believes a private company would be able to prevent.

In December the city released a document that laid out the scope of the proposal: The contract would last for 20 years and include operating and maintaining the systems, billing, customer service, and designing and carrying out the capital improvements.

The companies that have expressed an interest in the deal are a partnership of OMI and Thames Water; a partnership of California Water Service and United Water called Stockton Water Service; and U.S. Filter.¹

Mayor Podesto’s plan could easily

backfire. Private companies not only have to turn a profit and pay taxes, shareholder dividends and high executive salaries, they are also ineligible for low-interest public financing, thus raising the cost of capital improvements.

To their credit, city officials have made it clear that they would privatize the water systems only if it is to the city’s advantage. The city is shooting for cost savings of 15 percent, though this is not a “hard and fast” criterion.²

Another worry is that Alternative Resources, the Massachusetts-based consulting firm that will play a key role in deciding whether to privatize and selecting the winning company, is a major player in this area. The firm’s membership in the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships, one of the country’s most vigorous advocates of privatization, raises questions about its objectivity.

Before the ink dries, Stockton residents still have the opportunity to become educated about the sort of company that may be taking their money for years to come. By all appearances it won’t be a company run by people you’d be likely to have over for dinner.

OMI Inc. / Thames Water

Operations Management International, or

OMI Inc., was created by an engineering firm CH2M Hill in 1980. OMI specializes in managing water and wastewater facilities, but its engineering base allows it to also offer design and construction services — a combination that proves especially popular among municipalities handing out so-called design-build-operate contracts, or DBOs.

With today's popularity of one-stop shopping in water, wastewater and other industries, OMI is perfectly positioned for expansion. OMI has operations in the U.S., Middle East and Asia. Although OMI is small in comparison to its two competitors vying for Stockton's water systems, its record gives more than enough cause for concern.

- In Bergen County, New Jersey, OMI was embroiled in a scandal involving County Executive William "Pat" Schuber. The official was accused of trying to force the privatization of the county's wastewater treatment facility to pay back his campaign contributors. OMI, its attorneys at Amoroso & Beirman, and CH2M Hill gave thousands of dollars to Schuber and to the local Republican Party.³ This past June, the Bergen County Utility Authority voted 3-1 against privatization, with Vice Chair Joseph Tedeschi expressing concerns that OMI's emphasis on profits would compromise maintenance and increase the risk of spillage and line breaks. Schuber considered whether to veto the decision,⁴ but in July he decided not to.^{4a}

- In May 2000, the City Council of Biddeford, Maine, voted unanimously to withhold a payment for operations and capital expenditures from OMI until the company fixed an odor problem at the city's wastewater treatment plant. City officials took action in response to numerous complaints from residents and business owners, who were regularly confronted with the smell of raw sewage.⁵

- Daniel Wallace, former director of the sewage system that OMI managed for the city of Georgetown, Texas, was charged with using false invoices to buy more than \$200,000 worth of personal items with company money. City records also showed that Wallace set up a private company that procured a wastewater contract from the city. Even though the company denied that Wallace stole any city funds, OMI paid Georgetown more than \$100,000.⁶

- After OMI took over managing the water system of Clermont County, Ohio, residents saw

their water turn brown for several weeks. Last August, county officials were forced to schedule a series of public meetings to address the problem. OMI executives explained that the color was caused by the flushing process it was using to purge the system.⁷

- OMI's operations also stirred a controversy in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where the company operates the water system for a nuclear site. The workers there alleged that contaminated water caused some of the plant's employees to take ill. Richard Bird, a Boston physician whose specialty is occupational and environmental medicine, said polluted water sources may have been the cause of sicknesses. According to the workers, evidence suggested that water plant operators flushed the system before the water was sampled for possible contamination. The company denied the allegations.⁸

- In September 1999, an OMI-operated plant in Carol Stream, Illinois, dumped untreated and partially treated wastewater into Kline Creek for about 12 hours after a malfunction at the water reclamation center. The discharge lowered the levels of dissolved oxygen in the water, causing a fish kill.⁹

Like in Stockton, OMI will also be submitting a bid to operate New Orleans' water and wastewater systems together with British Thames Water,^{9a} now owned by RWE AG, a German energy giant. Thames Water, the largest water company in England and one of the largest in the world, has been a key player in the British water industry since the country privatized its water in 1989. Based on its record, Thames Water is more inclined to put the interests of its shareholders before those of its customers:

- The company raised its rates by 99 percent (44 percent in real terms) during the decade following the 1989 privatization.¹⁰

- In 1995, Thames Water cut its investment in infrastructure by £350 million (\$490 million). Instead of taking the savings and reducing customers' rates — by about £10 per month per customer (about \$14) — the company used the money to boost its already high profits and dividends.^{10a} This transfer of additional public money to the private sector took place after a 50 percent rate increase over the previous six years.¹¹

- From 1989 to 1998, the company's pre-tax profits increased by 160 percent to £419 million (about \$603 million).¹² Thames Water's

profit margins in England were almost seven times higher than those of the global conglomerate, Vivendi Water internationally.¹³

- In 1999 alone, the British Environment Agency documented Thames Water's involvement in 233 pollution incidents, resulting in eight prosecutions. Between 1989 and 1997, the company was prosecuted for environmental violations 31 times.¹⁴

United Water Resources

California Water Service has a good service record, but the same cannot be said of its bidding partner.

United Water Resources (UWR), formerly Hackensack Water Company, is a U.S. subsidiary of the French water giant Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux. Providing water and wastewater services to 7.5 million people in 17 states, UWR boasts that it holds five of the nation's largest water/wastewater contracts.¹⁵

Before it was acquired by Suez, UWR's 1999 revenues totaled \$362 million with a profit of \$33 million — more than doubling its profits in seven years.¹⁶ In 1998, UWR's chief operating officer Donald Correll pulled in nearly \$900,000 in salary and other compensation.¹⁷ (The most recent data is unavailable because after it was acquired by Suez, UWR ceased being a publicly traded company and stopped reporting its financial data to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.)

Throughout its tenure as the second-largest private provider of water and wastewater services in the U.S., UWR has maintained a unenviable corporate record. Here are some examples of past activities by UWR, some of its executives, and its parent company, Suez Lyonnaise, that do not speak positively of the company's track record.

- UWR's performance in Atlanta, where it secured a \$21.4 million water service contract in 1998, has been marred by complaints of poor customer service and inoperative fire hydrants. In 2000, some Atlantans started finding debris in their water, which also had begun to take on a brownish color. The company, however, did not initially acknowledge the problem.¹⁸ Four months later, many residents reported they were still experiencing the same problems.¹⁹ Even more complaints resulted from the company's failure to promptly repair broken fire hydrants, a problem that endangered the lives of residents.

In response to residents' concerns, UWR executives said that testing fire hydrants after they were repaired was a city's obligation -- a claim that city officials rejected on the grounds that the company should ensure that hydrants are left working.²⁰ Moreover, residents filed numerous complaints about delays and slow service. In March 1999, for example, when the Breakwater Homeowners Association paid \$2,700 to have three meters installed, UWR told the association that the job would take 10 weeks. Six months later, the company installed the first meter.²¹

- In 2000, UWR executives from several states donated \$10,900 to Ralph Campbell's campaign to be elected North Carolina's state auditor — even though UWR has no subsidiaries in that state.²² Here's the connection: Ralph Campbell is a brother of Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell.

- In 1997, UWR customers in the Florida counties of St. Johns, Duval and Nassau saw their rates increase by an average of \$9.44 per month, drawing no small amount of indignation. One local ratepayer, Richard H. Harlan Jr., was quoted in a Jacksonville newspaper as calling the company "the biggest bunch of highway robbers."²³ In 1998, the company requested yet another rate increase. The request was granted by Florida's Public Service Commission in 1999. The water rates increased by another 12.5 percent and the sewage rates rose more 5.4 percent. While reviewing the rate hike request, the state's Public Service Commission discovered that UWR overestimated its expenses by \$1.05 million.²⁴

Finally, to the relief of local residents, the Jacksonville Electric Authority in 2001 agreed to buy out UWR's properties. Under public operation, the average residential rates are expected to drop by 25 percent.²⁵

- In 1996, the city of Jersey City, N.J., hired UWR to operate and maintain its water system. Today, just five years later, city officials no longer express much enthusiasm about the UWR's performance. According to Kathleen Deely of the Municipal Utility Authority (MUA), the city has learned that UWR's current performance is "no worse, no better" than MUA's past performance²⁶ A senior MUA official reports that a lack of financial transparency prevents the city from evaluating whether the UWR's fees are reasonable. The company isn't required to open its books for public review. Instead, it just sends a

bill to the city. Hard to believe as it may seem, the contract doesn't prevent UWR from overcharging its customers, because no review process is built into the arrangement.²⁷ Additionally, the company's customer service representatives often direct user complaints to the MUA, even in cases where the company is directly responsible for the problems — many of which should have been prevented in the first place. Moreover, a combination of broken meters and underpaid meter-readers working for a subcontractor frequently causes erroneous billing.²⁸

The record of United Water Resources' parent company, Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux, also deserves close inspection. Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux, the major component of Suez Group, is the world's largest water service corporation. With 110 million customers around the globe and \$30.1 billion in revenues in 2000,^{28a} this multinational behemoth possesses tremendous economic and political clout. And it has liberally used this clout to obtain contracts and expand its sphere of influence.

In the last few years, Suez has been busy either acquiring or merging with water companies in Europe and the U.S. With the purchase of UWR, it aggressively entered the U.S. market. In 2001, it took over Environmental Systems Co. (Enesco), a leading industrial hazardous waste treatment company. Suez's business practices raise serious concerns:

- In 2000, Limeira City, Brazil tried to reclaim its water system from Suez. In the first five years of the contract, Suez invested only 18 million Brazilian Real (BRL), far short of the 36 million BRL investment requirement specified in the contract.²⁹

- In 1996, government officials in Grenoble, France, and a senior executive of Lyonnaise des Eaux received prison sentences for bribery relating to a contract award.³⁰

- Typically, Suez contracts are secretive, as with most water companies. For example, its contract with a South African municipality states: "The documentation contained herein has been developed exclusively by the operator (WSSA) and shall not be disclosed to third parties without the written approval of the operator."³¹

U.S. Filter

U.S. Filter is a subsidiary of another French giant, Vivendi Environnement, which provides water and wastewater management services in

some 100 countries via its Vivendi Water Division. Vivendi is part of Vivendi Universal, a conglomerate that also includes Universal Music Group, Universal Studios and telecom provider Cegetel. In 2000 Vivendi Environnement had revenues of EUR 26.5 billion (about \$24 billion) and profits of EUR 3.5 billion (about \$3.2 billion).³² U.S. Filter is four times larger than the nearest U.S. competitor.³³

U.S. Filter recently took over operation and maintenance of another company, Professional Services Group, or PSG. Soon thereafter, U.S. Filter was acquired by Vivendi.

Based on their track records, none of these three companies inspire much confidence in their ability to responsibly steward public resources. Further, U.S. Filter's decision to purchase the scandal-tarnished PSG raises question about U.S. Filter's judgment.

- On July 26, an electrical fire interrupted for two and a half hours the operations of New Orleans' East Bank Sewage Treatment Plant, which serves 440,000 people and is operated by U.S. Filter.³⁴ Raw sewage backed up, covered surrounding property and made its way through some of the plant's offices. The plant's operators diverted the untreated raw sewage into the Mississippi River for two hours before the plant returned to operation.³⁵ City Councilmember Jim Singleton said officials with the city's Sewerage and Water Board (S&WB) told him that U.S. Filter was aware of the equipment problems for several weeks and knew they could cause serious damage, but took no action.³⁶ The fire came only a few months after two broken incinerators caused excess, untreated sewage sludge to be removed from the facility in trucks. Residents of the Arabi Park and Carolyn Park neighborhoods of St. Bernard Parish were exposed to the stench for more than two months.³⁷

- The dirt of the operation wasn't limited to how the sewage was handled. It extended to how the money was handled, too. This past May, former S&WB member Katherine Maraldo and three former PSG executives were indicted with giving a \$70,000 bribe to Maraldo, who in turn recommended that the city renew its wastewater treatment contract with PSG for five more years. The company allegedly falsified records to cover up the bribes. PSG's former president, vice president and a consultant (who was once the company's vice president) were also charged

with, among other things, conspiracy and mail fraud — charges that could land them up to 50 years in prison. Aqua Alliance, PSG's parent company, agreed earlier to plead guilty to the charge of bribery and pay a \$3 million fine. At the time the payments were made, PSG was not owned by U.S. Filter.³⁸ It is unclear whether U.S. Filter has replaced all PSG staff members who were involved with the scheme.

- Between 1996 and 1999, PSG gave \$700,000 to two close associates of Joseph P. Ganim, the mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, in order to obtain a contract to operate the city's wastewater treatment plant. According to a local press account, one of the mayor's associates "told a PSG employee that the company had to pay — or forget about doing business in Bridgeport." Instead of walking away from the situation, PSG paid the money and received the contract. This past June, the mayor's two associates pleaded guilty to federal charges of bribery, fraud and tax evasion in connection with the plot. Despite the fact that PSG agreed to make what local press accounts termed "kickbacks," federal prosecutors do not believe that the company committed a crime, and that the scheme was initiated by the mayor's associates. However, prosecutors are continuing to investigate allegations of improper payments by PSG to public officials in Bridgeport, as well as in New Orleans.^{39, 39a, 39b, 39c}

- U.S. Filter shareholders took Vivendi to court over allegedly illegal payments the corporation made to U.S. Filter executives in exchange for their support of Vivendi's effort to acquire the company.⁴⁰

- Bribery mars Vivendi's international record, too. In 1997, Vivendi executives were convicted of bribing the mayor of St-Denis, France, to obtain a water concession.⁴¹ And the former mayor of Angouleme, France, admitted accepting \$55,000 from Générale des Eaux in exchange for awarding a contract to the company.⁴²

- A 1999 report on Vivendi's operations in Puerto Rico by the Office of the Comptroller criticized the company for deficiencies in maintenance, repair and operation of Puerto Rico's water and wastewater system. The comptroller charged the company with failing to provide running water in many areas, and with providing customers with bills but no water.⁴³ All the while, the water supply to U.S. military bases and tourist

resorts was never interrupted.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Upon evaluating these companies, one may question the wisdom of entrusting Stockton's water, wastewater and stormwater systems to any one of them. Though privatization may not result in corruption or questionable practices, serious concerns about rates and operations remain. And, with so much control being transferred to a private company, the city's ability to remedy problems will be limited. Considering that the Municipal Utilities District has lower rates than Stockton's private provider, why the city would to take such a risk is a mystery.

Privatization proponents argue that a private company would save taxpayer money. However, the city is already saving money — enough, it is estimated, to fend off rate increases for 10 years while performing necessary capital improvements. Moreover, claims that private companies can save money are usually projections against projections, often not substantiated by actual data. Any savings achieved by reducing the workforce, for example, would be offset by higher costs of private financing, taxes that only private companies must pay, million-dollar salaries to company executives, and dividends to the overseas shareholders. And, unexpected costs may force the city to raise rates.

As for customer service, corporate executives with a 20-year monopoly would likely be less responsive to residents' complaints than public officials, who must stand for reelection. After holding for the "next available representative" when calling the company, residents may want to make a trip to City Hall and vent their frustration there, only to find that the city is no longer responsible.

A decision to privatize would be virtually impossible to reverse. Even if the company fails to live up to its contractual obligations, proving breach of contract would be a very difficult prospect, entangling the city in a lengthy and costly legal battle.

While responsible and consumer-oriented water companies do exist, whether Stockton's bidders are among them is an open question that may not be answered until it's too late.

Is Stockton's entire water and wastewater system run so poorly as to justify taking on such risks?

No.

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