

NEWS

Removal of water fountains leaves UBC parched

BY STANLEY TROMP

About 100 water fountains at the University of British Columbia have been mistakenly torn out in the past two years, according to UBC officials. This has forced students to bring water from home, drink from washroom taps, or buy the bottled water that is being sold on campus under an exclusive marketing deal with Coca-Cola.

A UBC study in 1994 found that most of the fountains' water quality was safe but that two fountains in a pre-1960 building had slightly higher than acceptable lead levels and needed to be removed. They were built with copper pipe, using lead solder, which eventually leaches into the water system.

UBC plant-operations director Paul Becker issued a work order in 1997 to remove the two fountains and repair others. But former UBC plumbing-shop staffers misinterpreted "repair" as "remove", Becker said, and pulled out 97 fountains in 17 buildings. "I think at that time we should have been more proactive at looking at other options and communicating better to campus," he told the *Georgia Straight*.

Several reasons were offered by the plumbing shop for the removal: some of the fountains were in washrooms, which building codes no longer allow; they were costly to maintain; they often broke down, with no spare parts available; and the galvanized piping produced a bad taste.

committee looking, along with the student body's Alma Mater Society, for water-supply options, which could include new fountains, a filtration system, or water coolers. He said they hope to find a solution within a couple of months. In early May, UBC installed its first outdoor water fountain, between the AMS building and Brock Hall.

"A while ago in the bathroom, I saw a guy with his lips wrapped around a sink tap and slurping," UBC philosophy student Brahm Dorst told the *Straight*. "Now most people bring their own water from home."

A temporary measure might be to install water coolers, Dorst said. "But bringing back the fountains would be the best solution. There should be at least one in every building."

Many new UBC buildings, such as the Forest Sciences Centre, have no fountains. Plant-operations facilities manager Chris Skipper told the *Straight* that there is no legal requirement to have fountains in new buildings and that the university's health and safety branch said that bathroom water is drinkable. Becker also noted that because the washroom taps are used more often, the water is fresher than in fountains. The water is now tested each week at four campus locations.

Through UBC's 1995 cold-beverage agreement—by which Coca-Cola pays the university an unspecified sum each year for the exclusive right to sell its products on campus—some vending machines and all UBC cafeterias sell bottled water from Coke-affiliated companies (Evian of France and Dasanti of Canada).

Over the past two years, however, the UBC purchasing department has been making more contracts to buy bulk water from Coke's competitors (such as Canadian Springs) for UBC offices, which is possible because only retail-sale bottled water is covered by the Coke agreement.

Skipper said the fountains were not pulled out to boost bottled-water sales, likening the notion to an "X-Files-type conspiracy theory". ■

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