

Stockton Record

Saturday, February 21, 2004

Water wars: Stockton stars in 'Thirst' documentary

By Howard Lachtman
Record Staff Writer

Stockton is at the front of a 21st-century war: the control of water. Multinational corporations are turning to the precious resource as their new profit center. In Stockton, the battle lines have already been drawn between consumer activists and the companies they believe covet control of their water.

The bitter privatization conflict is spotlighted in "Thirst," a documentary screening today at University of the Pacific. It's a chance for residents to see the work of Berkeley filmmakers Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman before the film airs nationally this summer on more than 350 PBS stations.

"It's happening now," Snitow said. "Our water is up for grabs, and the fight is on."

Nearly half the film focuses on Stockton, with both city officials and opponents weighing in on the issue.

The filmmakers' cameras followed a split Stockton City Council in February 2003 as it approved one of the largest utility-privatization deals in the West -- a 20-year, \$600 million contract giving private conglomerate OMI-Thames operating control of the city's water, wastewater and stormwater systems.

Film host Bob Benedetti, executive director of UOP's Jacoby Center for Community and Regional Studies, hopes "Thirst" will foster an understanding of water issues and Stockton's role at the center of the dispute.

"Globalization and privatization are issues that are important to understand," Benedetti said. "Stockton residents need to see how important their city is in terms of national and international trends and policy reflection."

"One of the things the movie said to me is that the challenge of the multinationals is not only a challenge for the Third World, but also for the First and Second."

The film showcases the efforts of environmental and civic groups who fought the council's 4-3 approval. When Judge Bob McNatt ruled that the city didn't do its environmental homework, he gave Stockton six months to end its relationship with OMI-Thames. City leaders have authorized an appeal, leaving the contract in limbo. Although the film hasn't been updated with the story's latest developments, it's nevertheless an important record of the political process.

Dale Stocking is a member of the Concerned Citizens Coalition of Stockton, a civic group that opposes the privatization deal.

For Stocking and other coalition members, the importance of the film is the way it depicts the awakening of local residents to political decision making.

"We believe there's a nexus between what is happening locally and what is happening globally as corporations seek control of potable water," Stocking said. "Now that we're moving out of the oil era, the multinationals are looking toward water and control of water as a profit

area. A lot of us feel that is totally improper. We feel it is very important at the local level to maintain public control."

Even though supporters of the OMI-Thames deal said it would save the city \$175 million over 20 years, opponents raised red flags about costs that could be passed to consumers.

"Corporations exist for the purpose of making money," Stocking said.

Speaking from their Berkeley office, Snitow and Kaufman, whose film credits include "Secrets of Silicon Valley," said they wanted to film in Stockton after returning from Bolivia and India, where they witnessed (and filmed) protests, clashes and slayings -- all driven by the fight for water. In those countries, activists have taken to the streets to denounce corporate control and put pressure on governments to abandon privatization.

Back in Stockton, Snitow and Kaufman's cameras captured what they believe is democracy in action.

"Thirst" is a forum for such diverse perspectives as Mayor Gary Podesto, opposition councilman Larry Ruhstaller and Michael McDonald, a former maintenance supervisor at the Stockton Municipal Sewage Treatment Plant. McDonald left his job because of doubts that privatization would provide the best service to his customers.

Podesto agreed there should be concern about any company buying up water globally, but pointed out that that is not the case in Stockton.

"Folks opposed to this are thinking there is a slippery slope toward a bigger culture of globalization," he said. "We're hiring folks to run the equipment, that's all. We're not doing anything more than that, but I understand the paranoia that exists."

Podesto said the new water system is "operating like clockwork and saving us money."

"Our deal was just an operation and maintenance contract. We just have folks who wear a different jersey, but nothing has changed. The water and the wells belong to us. The control of the water and the rates belong to the city. That has always been our position."

Filmmaker Kaufman said she and Snitow got interested in the project when they heard that Enron was involved in the water business as well as the energy business.

"When we heard that, we said, 'Oh, that's really interesting,' and we started to do a little research."

The research led to Stockton -- and a story about water and something more.

"Issues about basic government came into question and the role of citizens in determining their own fate. That's what made it even more interesting for us. Our film is about people concerned about their resources -- and also their freedom."

Snitow sees Stockton as a paradigm of things to come across the nation.

"It's a fairly new trend, this battle over privatization of local utilities. We thought the entrance of really big companies with substantial capital and foreign bases into the utilities marketplace would make it hard for communities to get involved and active in the issues. We were surprised how intently people in Stockton were interested and engaged in the issues."

He was impressed by Michael McDonald -- the man who walked away from a job he loved when it passed from public to private control.

"Michael left out of a strong conviction about the concept of public service," Snitow said. "These are cynical times, so it was remarkable to find somebody who was so strongly convinced on a question of principle. He felt they weren't going to deliver the quality."

Kaufman said that though corporate behavior has come under increasing suspicion and investigation in the wake of recent scandals, many cities now facing economic disaster might need to rely on privatization as a solution to their fiscal problems.

"How are we going to solve our problems? These are essential issues. The story of Stockton is interesting to me because it's not only about Stockton; it's about any city in America that's struggling with a lack of funds and about corporations who want to come in and take advantage of opportunities and make profits."

In that respect, she sees Stockton as a model for citizen involvement and caring about the future of a community.

"I hope people identify with that sense of engagement and the sense that you can make a difference. Our film is just the opening act of what is about to unfold. We don't know what's going to happen, but we definitely know that people will fight on this one."

* To reach reporter Howard Lachtman, phone (209) 546-8269 or
e-mail lachtman@recordnet.com

To view article:

<http://www.recordnet.com/articlelink/022303/news/articles/022303-gn-6.php>