

City may reject mandate

FLUORIDATION
■ Santa Cruz: Council, citing health concerns, will take final vote on whether to defy state order to fluoridate water.

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Santa Cruz, a town that frowns on all things artificial, is poised to become the first California city to officially flout a state water fluoridation law.

The city council will vote Tuesday whether to reject the state's 1995 mandate to fluoridate local water, one of the most widespread public health measures in the country. It is emblematic of the paradoxical debate that has taken

place over the past half century, in which fluoridation's fiercest foes have linked it to everything from cancer to brain damage. The conservative bastion of San Diego has a longstanding ordinance on its books against fluoridation.

Santa Cruz is being closely watched as a test of the state's resolve to impose fluoridation on local communities to improve dental health. If the mandate is rejected, it will likely invite a legal battle with the state.

"I don't see anything in the state law that says 'thou shalt put fluoride in thy water,'" Santa Cruz City Attorney John Barisone said. "We're a charter city, and we have the ability to regulate in the area of municipal affairs. Our water is a municipal affair."

The city council last month voted overwhelmingly against fluoridating Santa Cruz's water supply, citing concerns about health risks.

But under a full-court press from local and state health officials, the

city's resolve appears to be weakening as the final approval vote approaches. Health advocates have appealed to the council's liberal nature, arguing that poor children would be left vulnerable to tooth decay without the protection of fluoride.

"I'm wavering," said Councilman Scott Kennedy, who joined in the 6-1 vote last month against fluoridation. "I don't think the public health benefits were given enough weight in the first vote. Since then, we've gotten a lot more information from the other point of view."

Today, nearly two-thirds of mu-

nicipal water providers serving 145 million people around the country fluoridate. But only 17 percent of those in California do so. That led the state in 1995 to adopt a law requiring municipal water suppliers with 10,000 or more customers to fluoridate when money becomes available.

What makes the issue particularly pressing in Santa Cruz is that the city is high on the state's priority list for fluoridation funding. The state law provided no money but required water districts to send estimates of what fluoridation would cost them. Funding, through health

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Council to vote on fluoridation.

Santa Cruz council members may be wavering after first vote against treatment of water

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foundations and private donors, will then be awarded based upon cost efficiency.

With only one central water treatment plant on Graham Hill Road, Santa Cruz's municipal water system, serving an estimated 85,000 people, would be among the cheapest to fluoridate, and is ranked 12th in the state for funding. Only one other Bay Area district, covering a portion of Daly City, ranks higher, according to Gary Hoffmann of the state Department of Health Services.

Though common in the East and Midwest, fluoridation is still scarce in many Western states — something Michael Easley, a New York dentist and American Dental Association spokesman, attributes to a government-leery "frontier mentality."

Occurs naturally

Fluoride is a naturally occurring element present at some level in all water. Fluoridation boosts that level by adding compounds, such as sodium silicofluoride or ammonium silicofluoride, that release the element when dissolved.

Fluoridation protects the teeth both by strengthening them as they are formed and continually bathing them in fluoride-enhanced saliva, Easley said. Dentists say it is even more effective than brushing with fluoride toothpaste, the benefits of which are more temporary.

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Experts agree, however, that high amounts of fluoride can be health-threatening. At two to three times the recommended level, fluoride can cause discoloration and mottling of the teeth. Even higher doses can pit the tooth enamel and make bones more brittle. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends against fluoridating above two parts per million and prohibits more than four parts per million.

Santa Cruz's opposition to fluoridation dates back to the Truman era. The city's elected leaders voted to fluoridate in 1951, but reversed the decision less than a year later under a hail of public protest. The matter was put on the ballot in 1952 when city residents roundly rejected fluoridation.

Several other cities took similar action. But since the 1995 law, Santa Cruz, where organic groceries outnumber supermarkets, is believed to be the only city that has taken formal steps toward rejecting the order. Other unfluoridated cities have been eager to embrace it.

Last month, Sacramento officials voted overwhelmingly in favor of fluoridation, and the Mountain View City Council took the first

step toward fluoridation by unanimously approving a \$6,000 feasibility study.

"So far, Santa Cruz has been the only one that has stood up and said we don't want anything to do with this," said Dr. Teran Gall, a dentist and spokesman for the California Dental Association.

Mass-medication concern

Most express concerns about the cumulative effect of ingesting enhanced levels of fluoride. While advocates of fluoridation compare it with iodizing salt or fortifying bread and milk with vitamins, critics question such a practice of "mass medicating" the public with no control over individual consumption and no alternatives for those who don't want to participate.

"We're talking about the use of a public water system," said Jeff Green, a health industry consultant and spokesman for the San Diego-based Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, which is seeking a state ballot initiative against fluoridation. "You're putting people at risk who

will be ingesting it indiscriminately over a lifetime with no control over dosage."

Other fluoride critics argue on more philosophical and economic grounds that public water should be treated with no more than is necessary to make it safe to drink.

Aversion to chemicals

"The fewer chemicals you have to add to provide good, potable water, the better," Santa Cruz Water Director Bill Kocher said. "Fluoride doesn't fall into that category. It uses water as a vehicle to achieve some other purpose."

Santa Cruz Mayor Celia Scott, who introduced the anti-fluoridation ordinance, said she has hardened her resolve.

"The more I read about it, the more concerned I get about adding fluoride," Scott said. "There are too many people who have substantial doubts."

But with the majority that voted against fluoride fracturing, Scott and council ally Katherine Beiers say they may seek a public referendum instead.