

Opponents vow to challenge city's fluoridation plans

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City officials have hired an engineering firm to develop plans for fluoridating the city's water supply, but opponents plan to circulate a petition to stop the process.

In July, the council agreed to seek state and federal grants for fluoridation, which has been in place since 1945 and serves 62 percent of the country's population. Last week, the council voted 5-2 to approve a \$63,000 contract with Carollo Engineers, an Arizona company, to develop fluoridation plans and

cost estimates.

But the decision has been tough to swallow for some in Santa Cruz County, where fluoridation has never been embraced. In March 1998, the Santa Cruz City Council, without a public vote, adopted an ordinance prohibiting the addition of fluoride to its system.

Now members of Watsonville Citizens for Safe Drinking Water plan to circulate a petition in support of what they call the Watsonville Safe Drinking Water Initiative. If the petition garners at least 1,300 signatures, the initiative will be placed on a city-wide ballot as early as March, said

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SPOKESMAN, WATSONVILLE CITIZENS FOR SAFE DRINKING WATER

Dan Hernandez, group spokesman.

"There are so many problems with our water now without adding anything else," Hernandez said. "I would rather stick with what's good already — pure, clean, everyday water."

Hernandez said allowing the addition of fluoride to the public water

supply could open a floodgate for the eventual addition of other chemicals or medications.

"It's not so much the fluoride," Hernandez said. "It's the idea of mass medication and some of the chemicals involved in fluoridation."

City Manager Carlos Palacios said the council has taken this decision

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seriously and has considered the fluoridation issue a number of times.

"Those in favor feel the fluoride will be good for our young people's teeth," Palacios said.

City officials would not advocate the use of fluoride that would contain additives in conflict with state Department of Health Services regulations, said David Koch, city public works director.

Health professionals say water fluoridation would prevent some cases of dental disease, which they say is a major health problem in Santa Cruz County.

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"I see kids on a daily basis who are suffering enormous pain from untreated dental decay," said Michelle Simon, a Watsonville pediatrician. "It's outrageous to know there's a safe, effective means to reduce this problem — fluoridation — but our kids aren't benefiting from it."

According to figures released by the Dientes! Community Dental Clinic in Watsonville, 75 percent of the more than 10,000 students in five Watsonville elementary schools screened by the group had untreated dental decay.

Still, Hernandez said there are alter-

natives to mass medication. Government health programs or private businesses likely would provide fluoride tablets free to those in need, he said.

"Look at each child's individual needs before adding anything to our water for everyone to take," Hernandez said.

But Dr. Bruce Donald, chair of the Monterey Bay Dental Society's Fluoridation Task Force, said tablets are not enough.

"Fluoride tablets for children to take at home depend on the compliance of parents and children," he said. "Many feel they can't afford to take advantage of the program."

If the initiative were approved by a majority of voters, it would prohibit anyone from adding anything to the public water supply for the purpose of

treating or affecting the physical or mental functions of persons consuming water — unless two standards are met.

First, the initiative says the Food and Drug Administration would have to approve the substance as safe and effective at all levels of consumption.

Second, the substance, at maximum use levels, would have to contain no contaminants at concentrations higher than either U.S. maximum level goals or state public health goals, whichever would be more protective.

However, approving what goes into water apparently does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Association, although that agency does regulate over-the-counter, anti-cavity drug products containing fluoride.

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"I don't think it makes sense to tie it (the initiative) to the FDA, since they have never taken jurisdiction over what is in the water," Koch said.

Unless the proposed initiative someday becomes an amendment to the city's municipal code, the city will move ahead with fluoridation plans.

The city's water supply comprises a network of 10 wells and the Corralitos Filter Plant, rather than a single water supply. That means the city will need to install 11 independent fluoridation injection systems to ensure recommended fluoride levels are provided to all customers.

In addition to planning for expansion of existing well buildings to make room for the new fluoridation equipment, the plan being developed by Carollo Engineers will include concept

designs for fluoridation, chlorination and water-quality monitoring equipment.

The conceptual design is expected to be completed by January 2002, with construction plans and specifications expected by June. Construction could begin in August.

Palacios said the city will apply for various grants to fund the project once the cost estimate has been established.

The council approved the project 5-2 at its Nov. 13 meeting, with Rafael Lopez, Richard De La Paz Jr., Mayor Chuck Carter, Vice Mayor Ana Ventura Phares and Ramon Gomez voting yes and Judy Doering-Nielsen and Betty Bobeda voting no.

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