

Watsonville flushes fluoride grant

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Responding to Watsonville voters, the city turned down a grant Wednesday that would have been used to fluoridate the city's water supply.

In a letter to the California Dental Association Foundation (CDA),

Passage of Measure S prevents program

City Manager Carlos Palacios rejected a nearly \$1 million grant that was going to be used to build fluoridation facilities for Watsonville's water supply. Palacios cited the

passage of Measure S, an anti-fluoridation initiative launched by the Citizens for Safe Drinking Water that made adding substances to the water illegal, as the reason for re-

jecting the grant.

"Because the voters passed this measure," Palacios wrote in his Dec. 11 letter, "the City Council has directed me not to accept the

revised offer and to exercise its right under Section IX to be excused from the Fluoridation Reimbursement Agreement."

In April of 2002, the Watsonville City Council agreed to accept a grant from the CDA that would fund the construction of a fluori-

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dation system and pay for part of the first year's operations. Under Section IX of the original agreement, a clause is written that allows the contract to be voided if a voter initiative rejects the bill.

The CDAF grant also provides some monies to cover the first year of operation costs of the fluoridation system. Under the agreement, the city is required to fund and operate the fluoridation facility for at least a decade.

Citizens for Safe Drinking Water spokesman Nick Bulaich argued that the 10-year requirement exempts Watsonville from a state law that mandates fluoridation. According to Section 116410 of the California Public Health Code, all charter cities that have more than 10,000

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hookups must fluoridate their water if outside funds become available to pay for it. While Measure S banned fluoride in Watsonville, many pro-fluoride forces argued that the local ordinance was in violation of state law and the city would be forced to fluoridate anyway.

Bulaich argued that the city was exempt from the law. According to the second section of the same law, charter cities can not be obligated to force taxpayers to pay for annual operational costs on fluoridation.

"A public water system is not required to comply," states the law, "if funding is not available to the

public water system sufficient to pay the non-capital operation and maintenance costs." Since the grant only covered the first year of operations, the city would have to take money out of its own general fund, or raise water rates to pay for fluoridation.

"The state can only force municipalities to fluoridate if outside money is available for the length of the project. It can't force the city itself to pay for fluoridation," Bulaich said.

City Attorney Alan Smith said that other scenarios could unfold once the first-year operational cost money ran out. "They could apply

for another grant," he said. Smith said he didn't think the city would be in violation of the law if it didn't fluoridate its water supply if there was no outside money to pay for it.

The CDAF tried to make a last minute move to save the grant by only requiring the city to fluoridate the water for one year instead of 10 using the grant money. Palacios rejected the offer stating, "It does seem impractical to spend over \$800,000 to install a fluoridation system that would only be used for one year until the Operations and Maintenance Grant expired."

The move upset local dentists and health officials who were pushing for fluoridation as a way to fight tooth decay in the city. Dentists and other teeth experts cited many documents from the American Dental Association that call for people in the medical industry to endorse fluoride.