

PUBLIC LIBRARY
SANTA CRUZ

57 mn 3.2498

Fluoride foes now from left

■ **Vote:** View on safety, not anti-communism, likely to mean liberal Santa Cruz will defy state, not put chemical in water.

BY JOHN WOOLFOLK
Mercury News Staff Writer

It came right out of left field this winter and caught dental health officials by surprise.

Fluoride's staunchest enemies once hailed from conservative bastions like San Diego in the Cold War years. They counted themselves among the ranks of anti-communists who raised health concerns and likened water fluoridation to socialized medicine.

But not this time around. This time, long after the Berlin Wall has fallen, long after health officials have embraced it as a way to protect the poor from dental disease,

fluoride's critics are now city fathers and mothers who come from a place so progressive its council includes a self-described peace activist and an avowed socialist.

A half a century later after fluoride's introduction, after it has been debated, studied and made part California law to protect residents from dental disease, Santa Cruz tonight is ready to oppose it by resolution.

"It's a little bit unusual that a liberal progressive city like Santa Cruz is turning its back on an underserved community like that," said Dave Nelson, a fluoride specialist with the state Department of Health Services.

It was former Democratic Assem-

blywoman Jackie Speier of South San Francisco who introduced the 1995 state law requiring most public water systems to fluoridate when money is provided. It passed overwhelmingly with bipartisan support.

Other liberal cities, such as San Francisco and Berkeley, have long been fluoridated. When fluoridation was first introduced after World War II, some of its critics denounced as a communist plot. San Diego in 1952 passed law against fluoridating its water.

Capturing some of the anti-fluoride flavor of those days, North Dakota dentist George Swendiman wrote in a Santa Cruz op-ed article in 1952, "If

the government is given further responsibility in prescribing for public health, that responsibility can lead to only one thing — yes, to socialized medicine. Plainly, we can never fight socialism by fluoridating the city water."

Today, such arguments have faded, Nelson said, adding that even San Diego officials have indicated they would not oppose the state's fluoride mandate.

But unlike concerns about communism, questions about fluoride safety remain.

Santa Cruz Mayor Celia Scott, a local Sierra Club leader and environmental lawyer who introduced the city's proposed law banning fluoridation without a public vote, said she remains concerned about possible health risks.

Local fluoride foe Theodora Kerry,

“It's not because they're liberals or conservatives; it's because they drink water and don't want more poison in it.”

who also is an advocate of medicinal marijuana, says it makes sense that liberals and conservatives would find common ground fighting fluoridation.

See **FLUORIDE**, Page 4B

Fluoride foes on left to affect city's vote

■ **FLUORIDE**

from Page 1B

"It's definitely striking a nerve in the community, and it's not because they're liberals or conservatives; it's because they drink water and don't want more poison in it," Kerry said.

While fluoridation is widely embraced by health officials across the country, Kerry noted those same officials oppose using marijuana to treat the ill, something numerous doctors and their patients have testified is beneficial.

"It's interesting, on the one hand you have this wonderfully useful plant that they're denying at the same time they want to put a poisonous chemical in the water," Kerry said.

Fluoridation boosts the level of flu-

oride in water to a level considered optimal in preventing tooth decay. That level, one part per million, is half the Environmental Protection Agency's recommended safety limit.

Fluoridation's advocates say 50 years of research have demonstrated it is safe and effective. Critics, however, argue that fluoride is being increasingly recognized as poisonous, that links to bone fractures and cancer have not been entirely ruled out, and that its benefits have lessened since the advent of fluoride toothpaste. They further note most fluoridated water is wasted on dishes, lawns and laundry.

Today, nearly two-thirds of American water districts, serving 145 million people, fluoridate. Most of those communities, however, are east of

the Rockies. Out west, fluoridation remains unpopular, something American Dental Association fluoride specialist Michael Easley attributes to a "frontier mentality."

Santa Cruz's proposed ordinance, scheduled for final approval, says fluoridation is a local, not state, issue, and that the city will not add fluoride without a public vote. The ordinance, which passed 4-2 earlier this month, states that fluoridation won't improve water quality and will raise water district maintenance costs. It also states that there remains considerable concern about health risks and that there is no way to keep fluoride out of the water for those who don't want it.

State legal analysts are studying whether Santa Cruz's ordinance is

valid. Nelson said the state will likely take Santa Cruz to court if the city refuses to fluoridate when funding becomes available.

Though there are fluoride critics from Mountain View to San Diego, Santa Cruz is alone in its move to pass an ordinance in direct conflict with the state fluoridation law.

"We don't really have any other community other than Santa Cruz that's going forward with protesting," Nelson said. "They seem to be unique in that respect."

The Santa Cruz City Council will consider final approval of an ordinance against fluoridating city water without a public vote during its 7 p.m. meeting at City Hall, 809 Center St.