

Watsonville water to be fluoridated

Fluoridation RP 9-30-10

City Council approves contract in contentious meeting Tuesday

By JON CHOWN

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Watsonville's City Council approved the acceptance of \$1.6 million from the California Dental Association Foundation to fluoridate the city's water Tuesday night in front of a mostly angry crowd that asked the council to defy the state's demands.

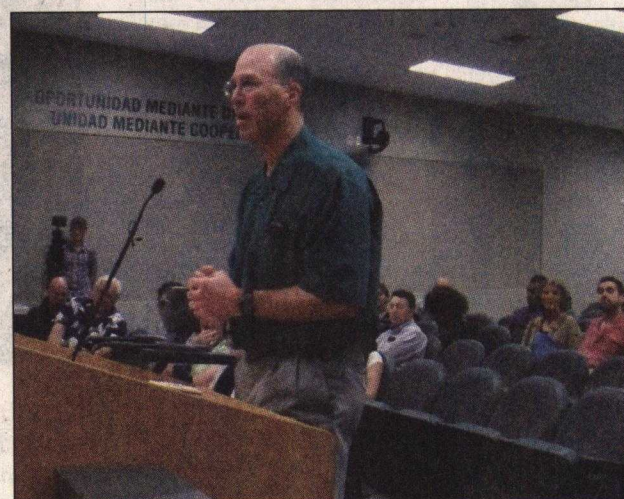
On a 4-3 vote, the council put the city

on the path to fluoridating its water. City Council members Luis Alejo, Manuel Bersamin, Antonio Rivas and Kimberly Petersen voted for the proposal, while Nancy Bilicich, Greg Caput and Emilio Martinez dissented.

On Wednesday, City Manager Carlos Palacios said it would probably be 18 to 24 months before the fluoridation system is operational.

The vote for approval was the culmination of years of debate and litigation. The City Council first passed a resolution accepting a grant to fluoridate in February of 2002, but in November of that year, Watsonville residents concerned about the safety of fluoridation passed Measure S, banning all

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John Martinelli shares his reservations about fluoridation during Tuesday night's City Council meeting.

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substances from the water not specifically approved by the Food and Drug Administration, which included fluoride.

But a state law requires cities to fluoridate if given the funding to do so, and Watsonville lost its battle in court to honor the voters' wishes. In August, the California Department of Public Health issued a citation to Watsonville for failure to comply with the state mandate to fluoridate. The citation cited a possible penalty of \$200 per day if the city does not comply.

Palacios said Public Health contacted him Wednesday to demand a letter of assurance that the city would now go forward with fluoridation. If received, it would consider rescinding the fine, which had reached \$6,000.

While those fines have been accumulating, the city has been wrangling over a contract that would make certain it is not burdened with any of the expense. A proposed contract was rejected by the City Council on a 4-3 vote in January, with Petersen being the swing vote.

On Tuesday, Petersen said she was satisfied with the new contract.

"I feel that we've done a pretty good job at addressing most of the issues," she said. "So, ultimately, I am recommending this contract."

Petersen was part of the three-member ad hoc committee that negotiated the new contract. The major changes in it from the January proposal are an indemnity for the city if it is sued, and the city is no longer liable for costs if they exceed estimates. The new contract was recommended by the ad hoc committee by a 2-1 vote.

Bilicich, the member of that committee who voted against adopting the contract, explained why.

"There are still some things we have not resolved," she said. "I think we have an obligation to protect the public."

Local health agency leaders, a few local dentists and CDAF executive director John Roth spoke in favor of fluoridation.

"We understand that there is controversy over fluoride, but in the scientific community there is no controversy," Roth said.

That was greeted by guffaws from many in the audience, some of whom pointed to studies showing a connection between cancer and fluoridation.

"Reject this contract; quit listening to these liars!" Nick Bulaich said.

"I'm a disabled veteran and I already have a lot of health problems," Robert Mejia said.

"I think this city has the responsibility to take this issue to the Supreme Court of the United States of America," said resident Jim Roszell.

More than three-quarters of those who spoke were against

the idea. John Martinelli, president of S. Martinelli & Company, raised concerns he had with the proposed contract.

"The law does not say we have to accept a bad contract," he said. "We do not need to compromise."

Martinelli's comment ran well over the allotted three minutes and his microphone was turned off and he was interrupted by Mayor Alejo. This caused a fury among the crowd, which shouted for him to continue. The mayor argued with Martinelli and the crowd for a minute or two before letting him finish.

Palacios said it was the most emotional City Council meeting he has attended in recent memory.

"It was certainly one of the most contentious," he said.

That contention was not only among the audience, but among council members.

Caput and Martinez said Alejo should recuse himself from the vote because he received campaign money from the CDAF.

"This is not about dental care ... it's about politics and

money," Martinez said. "Our mayor should recuse himself."

Despite his own campaign for the state 28th District Assembly seat reporting a \$7,800 donation from the California Dental Political Action Committee, Alejo denied he had received any money. "Not one cent," he said. "It's revisionist history. It's false."

During and after the vote, audience members expressed their anger. Rivas, while explaining his reasons for voting, was chastised. Bulaich made chicken noises, in reference to council members being too "chicken" to challenge the state, and another man was offering Nazi salutes to the council, referencing the Nazis' use of fluoridated water in concentration camps.

"Shut up! Shut up!" Rivas yelled at the audience.

Watsonville will be the first city in Santa Cruz County to fluoridate its water supply.