

Watsonville faces fluoridation fight again

Fluoridation

City Council to decide whether to accept \$1.5 million fluoridation grant

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By **DONNA JONES**

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — Watsonville's long-running battle against fluoridation of its water supply could end Tuesday when the City Council considers whether to accept a \$1.5 million grant to build and operate a system for two years.

But unresolved details in the contract for the California Dental Association Foundation grant as well as a question of who would pay for ongoing operations after the grant runs out remain.

City Manager Carlos Palacios

said despite questions, after three years of negotiations between city staff and the foundation, the time had come to bring the City Council into the discussion.

"We've been negotiating for years and years, and the contract was as close as it was going to get," Palacios said.

In 2001, the City Council decided to fluoridate at the urging of health professionals who said it would reduce tooth decay in a low-income community with dicey access to dental care.

But foes aren't convinced that fluoridation is safe and don't want it forced upon them

through the public water supply.

In 2002, Watsonville voters rejected fluoridation. But by that time the foundation already had offered a construction grant for a system, and since state law requires cities to fluoridate if money is available from an outside source, the California Department of Health Services ordered Watsonville to implement the program or face \$200-a-day fines.

Watsonville took legal action to block the order, but in 2006, in a precedent-setting judgment, a California appeals court ruled that state law trumped the city

ordinance.

But the court's order to fluoridate has been stalled as negotiations over the grant dragged on for the past three years.

County health leaders, touting the benefits of fluoridation, are once again urging the council to accept the grant.

"Prevention is almost always a less costly and more effective means to achieving a healthier community," wrote Jae Dale, chief executive officer of Watsonville Community Hospital in a Jan. 19 letter to the council.

Nick Bulaich, a Watsonville

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FIGHT

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resident who spearheaded the 2002 voter initiative, said the pros and cons of fluoridation aren't at issue. The contract is, and if it's not satisfactory, the city doesn't have to accept it, and it doesn't have to fluoridate. He argues the foundation should provide the money up front rather than require the city to seek reimbursement for its expenses, for example.

"Does this contract trigger state law? The answer is no," he said.

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JON ROTH, California Dental Association Foundation

Palacios said the city is treading in a gray area, and it will be up to the state to decide whether negotiations have been in good faith.

The foundation wants an answer by Jan. 31. Executive Director Jon Roth said the foundation's been negotiating in "the best faith" to get an agreement the city can live with. "If they decide not to (approve it), it's in the state

of California's hands whether they want to levy the compliance order," Roth said.

Even if the system gets built, there's no guarantee fluoridation would continue past the initial two years.

Both the foundation and Watsonville officials agree the city would be under no obligation to continue fluoridating unless outside funding became available.