

City aims to keep fluoridation plan on track in spite of looming vote

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Even as an anti-fluoridation measure on the November ballot looms, the council Tuesday put out a call for bids on installing a water fluoridation system.

The decision was aimed at "keeping the project moving along," said David Koch, city public works director. Accepting bids does not obligate the city to award a contract, he said. And while bids would be opened Oct. 31, the council would not consider approving any until its Nov. 12 session — one week after the citywide vote on Measure S.

However, Dan Hernandez, spokesman for Watsonville Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, a group opposed to fluoridation, said it is unreasonable for the city to move ahead, "especially since the voice of the people hasn't been heard yet."

"If the voters say no, why are we wasting city staff's time?" Hernandez said. "(City officials) would have a clearer direction after the election if they wait 'til then."

Measure S seeks to prohibit the city from adding any chemical to the city's water supply not approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Although the measure does not specifically mention fluoride, the group is opposed to the chemical, which is added to many municipal water supplies nationwide to prevent tooth decay.

If the measure passes and the city moves ahead with fluoridation anyway, "all they will do is turn it into a lawsuit," Hernandez warned.

State officials say the council is locked into its previous decision to fluoridate. State Assembly Bill 733 mandates the fluoridation of water systems that have 10,000 or more hookups when funding to do so is provided by a source other than the water agency or the taxpayers the water system serves.

In April, the council accepted a nearly \$1 million grant to fund the installation of fluoridation treatment equipment and cover operations and maintenance costs for one year. But in July, city officials voted 4 to 2 to put the measure on the November ballot after the citizens group gathered the necessary signatures to put the issue to a vote. Several council members said they were simply not willing to trump the rights of citizens to choose.

According to state Department of Health Services officials, the city must now fluoridate within two years — regardless of whether voters pass a referendum saying they don't want to. In general, state law supersedes local ordinances, according to Gary Hoffmann, head of the department's drinking water policy development unit. The department could levy fines against the city if it fails to meet a 2004 fluoridation deadline.

Mayor Betty Bobeda and Judy Doering-Nielsen voted against the motion to move ahead, while Chuck Carter, Ramon Gomez, Rafael Lopez, Ana Ventura Phares and Richard De La Paz voted for it.

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