

Watsonville finds fluoride plan hard to swallow

Opponents urge city to reject \$1.2 million grant from nonprofit

By **DONNA JONES**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Though many in Watsonville wish the issue would go away, water fluoridation is expected to be back on the city's agenda later this month.

In early February, the California Dental Association Foundation offered the city \$1.2 million to put the controversial chemical that fights tooth decay into the public water supply. But the city has yet to accept the offer, and some residents do not want fluoridation. The City



PALACIOS

Doubts city can legally reject grant offer

Council is tentatively scheduled to consider the offer and hold a public hearing March 27.

Vice Mayor Kimberly Petersen said she's been hearing from both sides on the issue through e-mails and letters. She also said she's been reading the pro and con materials being sent to her and expects the public hearing to be interesting.

"It's nice to see people paying attention and getting involved," Petersen said.

The concerns of fluoridation foes center on safety and what they say is the right of residents to drink tap water free from additives they oppose. Supporters say putting fluoride in public water systems has proved safe and effective during decades of use, and that it's the most certain way to prevent dental disease, especially in low-income communities.

City Manager Carlos Palacios said officials are still analyzing the grant proposal to make sure, for example, that the money will be enough to cover the cost of installing a fluoridation system. But he doubts the council can pass up the grant under state law.

State law requires cities with 10,000 or more residents to fluoridate if the money's available to do so. Watsonville, where voters in 2002 passed a measure that essentially banned fluoridation, lost a court battle over the issue last year.

"In my opinion and the city attorney's opinion, we don't feel we have much of an alternative," Palacios said. "It seems pretty clear we have to accept (the grant)."

Fluoride

Continued from Page A1

Nick Bulaich, who has spearheaded the local fight against fluoride for nearly five years, disagrees. He suggested city officials could scuttle the deal by rejecting certain provisions, such as a hold-harmless clause that releases the state and the foundation for legal

liability if anything goes wrong.

Bulaich also questions whether the city will be able to find a fluoride compound that can meet a national toxicology standard as required by law.

Public Works Director David Koch said the question will be part of his research in advance of the council decision, but added he believed a compound identified during earlier studies had been certified as meeting the standard.

"If that standard applies to our water system and the compound didn't comply with the standard, we would not add something that's against the law," Koch said. "We're going to have to look at all the issues raised by Nick Bulaich and other members of the community and move forward in a prudent manner."

Contact Donna Jones at djones@santacruzsentinel.com.