

Fluoride

Coming soon to a fountain near you?

Fluoridation

RIP-103902

ELECTION 2002

Battle lines drawn over health issue

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OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

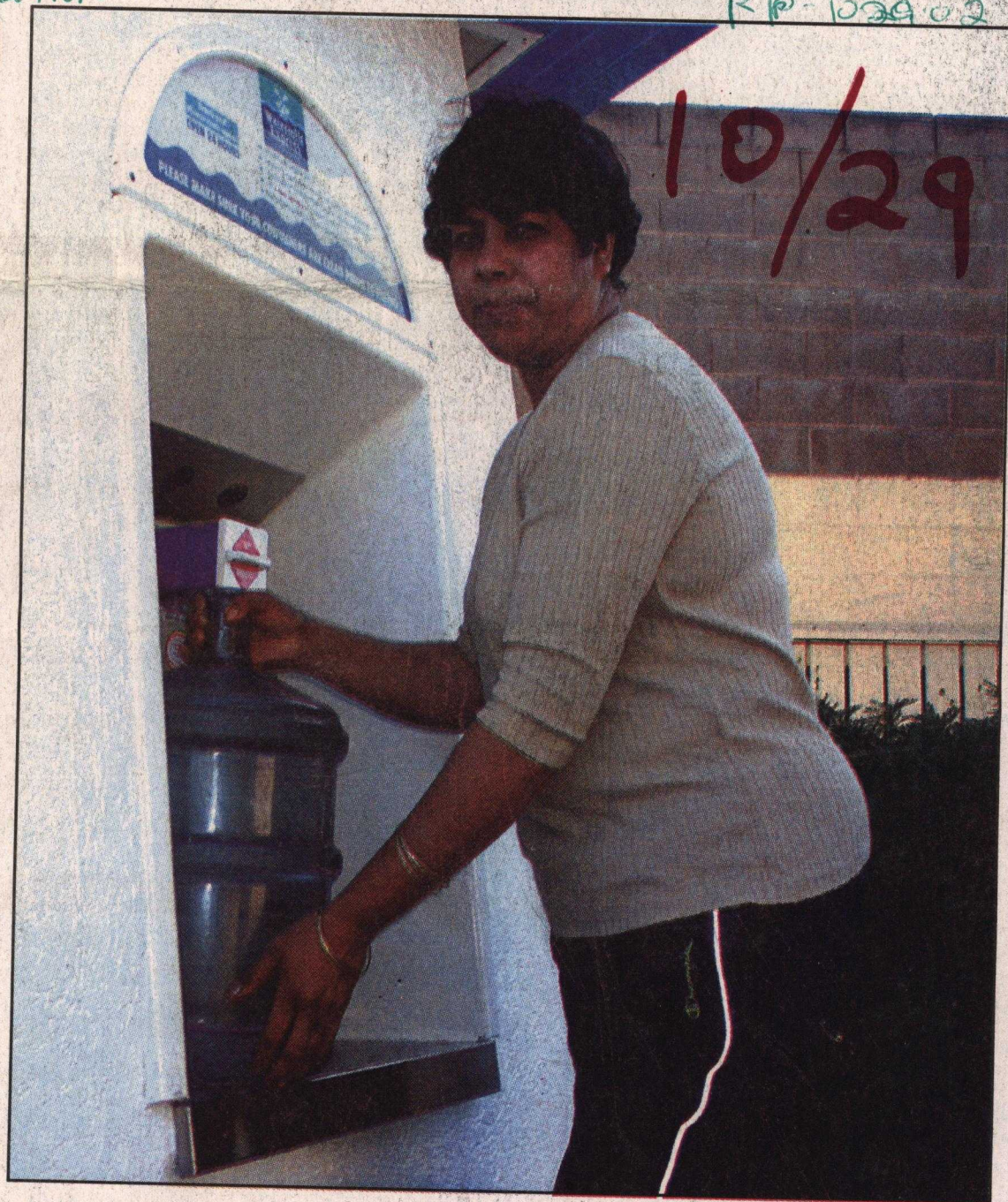
Watsonville residents are gearing up for one of their wettest battles to date. After gathering steam for months, the debate over fluoridating the water will come to a head on Election Day as voters decide if they're thirsty for the additive, or if they're satisfied with the water as is.

Originally a discussion on the merits of fluoridation, the debate over who controls Watsonville's water has shifted from the scientific arena to the realm of language. A war of words is beginning to ensue; forces on both sides are learning that in this debate, it's not quite what you say that is important, but how you say it.

Titled Measure S, the ordinance is written in such a way that a "yes" vote would stop fluoridation of Watsonville's water and a "no" vote would allow fluoridation to continue through.

Opposition to the measure includes an alignment between Watsonville's political establishment and medical communities who are fighting to ensure that Watsonville's water becomes fluoridated. The forces in favor of Measure S are the Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, a loose national

See FLUORIDE, page 10



Sophia Cervantes fills a 3-gallon container with filtered water at a Watermill Express on East Lake Avenue Monday. She said she visits the station on a regular basis to purchase drinking and cooking water for her family.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

FLUORIDE

From page 1

grassroots network aligned with dozens of local residents.

Opponents of Measure S argue that the dental health of Watsonville's youth is terrible. A study in the fall of 2000 by Dientes Community Dental Clinic blamed poverty and lack of access to dental care as the primary reason for the epidemic. The group found that tooth decay exists in 75 percent of Watsonville's school children. Almost every dentist and medical professional in Watsonville believes that fluoridation is the best way to fight this epidemic.

Yet Citizens for Safe Drinking Water believe that it's unsafe to undertake a mass fluoridation of the water. Maureen Jones, chief financier behind the effort to block fluoridation, said she thinks fluoride is dangerous and has a Web site with documents to back her claim up. She also has an advantage in this election: her group decided how the question would be worded on the ballot.

The measure asks voters whether the city of Watsonville should require that substances added to the public water supply for purposes other than to make water safe require approval by the Food and Drug Administration.

"Additives to water that make health claims need FDA approval," said Citizens for Safe Drinking Water director Jeff Green. Currently water fluoridation is regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency and has never been approved or disapproved by the FDA. Green argues that any substance that makes a health claim requires regulation by the FDA, which he believes should include fluoride water additives. Green suggested the FDA didn't fight to regulate the fluoride because it was "politically protected poison."

Supporters of Measure S are adamant that their wording stand. The group even took Watsonville City Attorney Allen Smith to court after they were unsatisfied with his rewording of the ballot question.

"I think it's intentionally misleading," said orthodontist James Jacobson, spokesman in the fight against Measure S. "It's 100 percent disingenuous. If you want to block fluoride say so. If you want to confuse everyone, come up with bogus ballot language."

Jacobson said that the Citizens for Safe Drinking Water are requiring FDA approval of the ballot measure because they know that the FDA has no mandate on the substance. "They're trying to imply that the FDA regulates something that it does not. Their tactics are to scare enough people to think it's unsafe and vote against it."

Jacobson, who lives in La Selva Beach and practices in Watsonville, said that the health benefits of water fluoridation are a proven medical fact, endorsed by almost every major medical journal and professional society. "The Centers for Disease Control called water fluoridation one of the 10 greatest medical achievements of the 20th Century," he points out. Both the American and Californian Dental Association, along with the American Medical Association, the World Health Organization, and the Surgeon's General Office have backed fluoridation of water for more than 40 years.

Yet opponents of fluoridation disagree. On their Web site (keepers-of-the-well.com), the group cites countless studies outlining what they believe are the health risks tied to fluoridation. From increases in hip-related injuries to fluorosis (what happens when too much fluoride is ingested), anti-fluoride opponents have linked the substance to countless health dangers.

Santa Cruz City Council member Cynthia Mathews calls the anti-fluoridation literature "junk science," claiming that Measure S proponents use scare tactics to distort

the issue. "They take statements out of context. They'll use one portion of a study that concludes fluoride is safe and then twist it around to show the opposite."

Yet backers of Measure S are arguing that doctors are the ones using tactics of intimidation. In a recent column by Dr. Jacobson in Friday's Register-Pajaronian, the orthodontist called supporters of Measure S "terrorists." Nick Bulaich, spokesperson for Measure S, was outraged by the comparison. "To come from a so-called professional after 9/11 is utterly disgusting," said Bulaich. "He wants to make people think we're a fringe element. How can 2,239 signatures in support of Measure S be a fringe element?"

"These guys are just repeating what they were taught in dental school," argues Green, who thinks that the dental community is blindly supporting fluoridation. "They're too embarrassed to admit that they've been wrong for the last 50 years."

Jones, who has been involved in the fight against fluoride since 1990, said that her determination to stop fluoride began with her upbringing. "My father was very opposed to fluoride. He told me to stay away from the science," said Jones of her father Clark Bradley, former Santa Clara assemblyman and state senator. Bradley was the first person to introduce legislation attempting to stop fluoride.

"My father told me it was more important to leave people the choice," said Jones. Despite her father's advice, Jones pushed the fluoride debate out of the realm of philosophical and into the realm of science. Despite allegations of bad science, Jones continues to cite what she claims are more than 4,000 documents condemning the use of fluoride.

Allied with Jones is Citizens for

Safe Drinking Water. The group undertakes political campaigns in many different cities in its attempt to block water fluoridation. Jones said the group grows in each town they work in as they convince more people to join their cause and Jones uses the income from a trailer park in Northern California to fund the operation.

The debate surrounding the fluoridation of Watsonville's water predates Measure S. In July of 2001, the Watsonville City Council voted 5-2 to fluoridate the water supply despite the protests of Jones and Green. Unhappy with the outcome of the decision, the group launched a signature-collecting campaign and eventually gathered enough to put the decision before the voters.

Several City Council members have suggested that if Measure S passes then the city could face a lawsuit from Sacramento for not fluoridating. A 1996 state law mandates that cities with more than 10,000 water hookups must fluoridate their water if outside money is available.

Bulaich said that the state would never take action against the city of Watsonville. "Many cities in California have decided not to fluoridate and no action was ever taken," said Bulaich, who includes Santa Cruz in the list of cities who have not opted for the additive.

He points out that the state can only force fluoridation if outside money is available for the length of the project. While Watsonville would fund the construction of the fluoridation system through outside grants, it would require \$200,000 a year of city money to operate. Bulaich said "State laws says that a taxpayer can not be obligated to pay for fluoridation," and that the state will not intervene and force fluoridation.