

Fluoride opponents aim for ballot

By **DAN WHITE**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Opponents of fluoride in the city's water supply say they are forcing the issue to a popular vote — with 12,000 signatures to back them up.

But questions remain about whether a majority "no" vote would let the city sidestep state fluoride mandates.

The city water supply does not contain fluoride, but hundreds of other California communities use it as an inexpensive way to reduce dental problems.

Fluoride foes, who argue it is a poisonous substance, want a special election that would bring the issue to voters in a local initiative. The ballot would also cover any other products or substances "intended to affect the physical or mental functions" of people.

Lois Kirby, treasurer of Santa Cruz Citizens For Safe Drinking Water, said residents have a right to decide for themselves.

"My experience talking to people is that everyone wants to have a choice, even

some of them who think fluoride is OK," she said.

According to the City Clerk's Office, the opponents need a minimum of about 5,000 verified signatures, about 15 percent of the city's registered voters, to get a special election.

The residents turned in their signatures Monday, a few months after the City Council voted to leave fluoride to a popular mandate, rebuffing a state water fluoridation policy.

The opponents said the council vote was heartening but not enough, because the local government could reverse itself.

"The only real protection is a vote of the people," said Theodora Kerry, who attended the meeting about the petitions. "What the City Council giveth, the City Council can taketh away."

Others worried that their most vocal supporter, Mayor Celia Scott, isn't seeking another term. They also point out that Santa Cruz is 12th on a state list for fluoridation.

They are also aware of this issue's divisive power. Fluoride supporters call it a

cheap way to protect teeth, especially in children. Its most ardent opponents call it a steadily accumulating toxin that should be viewed as a water quality problem and not a dental issue. The issue has been muddied with conflicting studies.

"It appears that there is a very long, very well documented history of safety for the fluoridation of water," said Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, who cast the only dissenting vote this spring when the city council voted 6-1 in favor of an anti-fluoride ordinance.

But opponents said they found even more validation in a videotape they showed Monday, featuring several researchers including the co-founder of the first toxicology lab for dentistry.

All speakers in the videotape say fluoride can lead to a variety of disorders and changes in brain chemistry. They emphasized recent warnings that parents should seek emergency care for their children if they swallow more than a pea-size amount of toothpaste.

Another debate hinges on whether the

city could successfully flout state authority.

"The answer to that question is 'no,' said Dr. David Nelson, a fluoride specialist with the state Office of Dental Health Services. "We say the state jurisdiction overrules the local authority."

But Nelson said the ultimate decision would probably be made in the Attorney General's Office.

Nelson, who has tried to persuade the city to support fluoride, said opponents may force a special election. "But will the public vote to prohibit it? I don't know," he said. "They may very well want it. But if this loses in Santa Cruz, we are left with a situation where someone will have to test this in court."

Consultant Jeff Green, who has been involved in opposition to the state mandate in other California cities, said the intake of fluoride will no longer be left to popular choice once it gets in the water.

"It can't be removed by filtration because the fluoride ion is smaller than a water molecule," he said.

10-6-98