

Dental foundation offers \$1.5 million for fluoridation

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Fluoride proponents call on City Council to accept award; opponents seek FDA approval

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Five years after its first attempt, the California Dental Association Foundation is renewing efforts to fluoridate Watsonville water with a new funding offer of \$1,563,038.

In a letter Wednesday to City Manager Carlos Palacios, the foundation announced it would offer \$1,242,700 for construction of water fluoridation facilities in Watsonville. Funding also includes \$320,338 for maintenance and operation for the first two years, according to Jon Roth, executive director of the CDA Foundation, which acts as the charitable arm

of the CDA.

The new grant follows years of legal wrangling and heated debate over adding fluoride to city water since the City Council first accepted a \$946,000 offer to fund fluoridation facility construction and first-year operation costs in 2002. In response, fluoride foes led the drive for voter-approved Measure S, which banned adding substances not approved by the Food and Drug Administration to city water.

After the city rejected a revised award from the CDA, the state Department of Health ordered the city to comply with the offer. Watsonville then pursued the case in San-

ta Cruz Superior Court, where a judge ruled in 2004 that state law trumped the local ordinance against adding fluoride to water. The Sixth Appellate Court upheld the decision.

Debate ground to a halt on Feb. 8, 2006, when the California Supreme Court declined to hear the city's case against adding fluoride.

Since that ruling, Roth said the city had sent revised cost estimates to the CDA Foundation. A working group also needed time to advise the foundation, which is responsible for distributing money for fluoridation from the California Endowment, a private philanthropic

group, Roth said.

Watsonville has long been considered an ideal fluoridation site because of its significant oral health needs, Roth said. The CDA Foundation hopes the new facilities can be constructed within 18 months, he said.

Santa Cruz County groups, including Salud Para La Gente, Santa Cruz Medical Society and the Monterey Bay Dental Society, that tout fluoridation as the most effective way to prevent tooth decay are now turning their attention to the City Council, which must decide whether to accept the grant.

Laura Marcus, executive direc-

tor of Dientes Community Dental Care in Santa Cruz, cheered the offer, adding that her organization has called for water fluoridation since 1994. According to the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, California has the second highest rate of tooth decay in the country, next to Arkansas.

"Tooth decay can be easily prevented," Marcus said. "Fluoridation is a social justice issue. Watsonville kids deserve the same chance as other children."

In 2005, a screening of 64 percent of kindergarten students in

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the Pajaro Valley Unified School District found that one-third of them had tooth decay, Marcus said. Twenty-one percent did not have a regular dentist.

County health officer Poki Namkung is also urging Watsonville to accept the funds.

"Cities like San Francisco, Sacramento and Palo Alto have long ago recognized the connection between fluoridated water and good oral health," she said in a written statement. "This opportunity will allow Watsonville to adjust the level of fluoride to be effective and safe and join these cities in improving oral health."

Mayor Manuel Bersámin said that, while he believed the court decision trumps the local measure, he looked forward to hearing from fluoride opponents as well as new members of the council not involved in the early fluoridation debate.

"I'm anxious to hear any debate we're going to have as council," he said.

Fluoridation opponent Nick Bulaich said that while councilmembers may think they have to accept the funding, neither the state nor the court has said which type of fluoride additive to use.

Bulaich objects to what he called excess amounts of lead and arsenic in the liquid fluoride option used by most cities, Fluorosilicic Acid, and wants the council to ask for estimates on alternative substances.

He also wants to see the FDA designate fluoride as a safe substance before city leaders decide which additive to use.

"We get to see what council we have, either one that wants to protect the health of city residents or is a sellout to out-of-town toxic waste pushers," Bulaich said.

But Roth said that, despite opposition, the city must accept the funding.

"From our perspective, the state law and litigation really clarified that," he said. "Once the funds are available, the city must move forward."

City Attorney Alan Smith said Wednesday he had not yet seen the grant award and could not comment on whether the city would

have to accept it. Palacios did not return calls Thursday.

If water fluoridation receives the final go-ahead, new buildings or bigger structures might be required at the city's 10 wells and one filter plant, Public Works Director David Koch said Thursday.

At each site, the city would have to add pumps to inject fluoride into the water, as well as storage tanks and new alarm systems. After reviewing the grant, old plans would be revised before a bidding process could begin. That could take at least a year, Koch said.

Only in the bidding process will the city know whether the \$1.5 million grant will provide enough money, Koch said.