

Fight over fluoride not over yet

Fluoridation
City Council's decision could still be overturned

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The City Council's approval of adding fluoride to Watsonville's water supply Tuesday night has left proponents pleased but those opposed continue their struggle to prevent the system from being put into place.

In a 5-2 vote during a meeting packed with concerned citizens, council members passed a resolution to install a water fluoridation system. The estimated cost for maintenance and operation each year is about \$250,000 after an initial investment of about \$750,000.

According to City Clerk Lorraine Washington, there are two options that could overturn the council's action: a council member would have to ask to reconsider the motion or a referendum can be circulated.

If the motion is reconsidered, the majority of the council must agree and they could vote to re-send the resolution they adopted. They could also choose to put it on the ballot for a special election in March 2002 or the general election in November 2002.

In order for a referendum to be circulated, it must be turned in with petition signatures no later than 30 days after the action was approved. At least 10 percent of the city's registered voters must sign the petition for the item to go before the council. Watsonville currently has 13,244 registered voters.

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The next step in the process to implement the system is to apply for grants. Council member Betty Bobeda stated there is not enough money in the city's budget to construct the \$750,000 system. If everything goes according to plan, it could take about 18 months before Watsonville's water becomes fluoridated.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with fluoride, but I'm not for putting it in the water. There are so many people drinking water, it should be the vote of the people, not the council," said Bobeda.

"It was fairly obvious to us that there was no attempt to answer the most important question of all which is how much fluoride are people already receiving in order to understand how much they'll receive in the water," said Jeff Green, director for the group Citizens for Safe Drinking Water. "Also not dealt with is to what degree will the city be accountable for the costs of harm to individuals; fluoride can't be removed by simple filtration. There was no willingness to answer any one of these two questions."

Green also saw a problem with the intentions some of the people that spoke to the council had and how the people receiving the fluoridated water could play no part in the decision making.

"People within the community don't believe that the people who stood up were representatives of the community drinking the water. If you actually counted noses, there was a number of people that did belong to the public health department. ... There wasn't any doubt that people who work for the government were pushing this really hard," Green stated.

"This issue is not going to go away. We're talking about everybody drinking this water and eating food for the rest of their lives and the decision was made by five people who were not willing to answer clear questions," he added.

Dr. Marc Grossman, who is a pediatric dentist in Freedom, worked with American Indians in Oklahoma and helped put fluoride in their water. In addition to other forms of prevention, Grossman saw dramatic drops in tooth decay and he ended up doing less fillings.

"I think it's great that Watsonville is really going to help the children in the community. ... It definitely helps the general populous and gives a little extra edge to strengthen teeth more," said Grossman.

He hasn't seen any adverse effects in areas already with fluoridated water and states that even in countries where fluoridation naturally occurs at higher levels there are no negative health effects.

"I'm very pleased they passed the issue. I think water fluoridation is a very important, preventative measure public health-wise in helping to prevent cavities. It's important for people to know that you can't count on fluoride alone," said Dr. Janet Bell, a retired pediatrician. "It's also important that mothers not give babies anything in the bottle but water after 10 months because they go to sleep with food in their mouths, which dental bacteria grows on."

If a referendum isn't received by Aug. 16, according to Washington, the council's action will stand and plans to install the system will proceed.