

WATSONVILLE FLUORIDE FIGHT

State mum on plans to enforce fluoridation

Fluoridation
City Council could consider
controversial project
in March or April

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WATSONVILLE — The state health department is keeping tabs on the city's progress toward water fluoridation, but declines to say what action it will take if Watsonville doesn't move forward with the project.

The health department could

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impose daily fines if Watsonville fails to comply with a court order to fluoridate.

But Ken August, a spokesman for the California Department of Health Services, declined to respond to a Sentinel question about potential state actions.

"The department is currently awaiting a response to our letter from the city of Watsonville," he said, adding that's all he could say.

The letter he referenced, penned

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by Jan Sweigert, district engineer for the state health department's Monterey Drinking Water Field Operations Branch, on Feb. 9, asked for a status report by Feb. 16.

The city is in negotiations with the California Dental Association Foundation over a contract for a nearly \$2 million grant to install fluoridation equipment and

operate the system for two years.

Fluoride foes, including at least one city councilman, Greg Caput, say Watsonville should wait to see if health officials try to enforce a state law requiring cities to fluoridate if an outside agency is willing to cover the cost.

The City Council delayed a decision on the grant in January, and established an ad hoc committee to study contract issues and return with recommendations.

City Manager Carlos Palacios, replying to Sweigert in a letter dated Thursday, blamed his tardy response on budget-imposed furloughs and staff's heavy workload.

He said the ad hoc committee had met twice and planned at least two additional meetings before bringing the contract back to the council in March or April.

Watsonville voters rejected fluoridation by a narrow majority in 2002, and the city fought the state order

in court for several years. Contract negotiations over the grant have been ongoing since the city lost its legal battle in 2006.

Most health experts say fluoridation helps prevent tooth decay and has been used safely in water systems serving millions of people across the United States for decades.

Opponents question the safety and effectiveness of the practice and say putting fluoride in public water supplies amounts to forced medication.