Water fluoridation meeting tonight

Fluoridation

Contentious issue goes before City Council

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The issue of water fluoridation has come back to Watsonville after being turned down as an option by voters roughly 36 years ago.

A special City Council meeting will be held at 7 p.m. tonight in the City Council Building on Main Street, Watsonville, during which supporters and opposers of the fluoridation system will be able to present their cases before City Council and community members. A recent study showed that 75 percent of children in Watsonville suffer from tooth disease and many in the dental and health care community believe it to be the city's biggest health problem.

Proponents of the issue, claim that fluoride is the cheapest and simplest way to fight tooth decay and to save many children from unnecessary suffering. It may also save parents from paying for costly dental work down the road.

It is estimated that to maintain a fluoridation system a 5.3 percent rate increase, amounting to $12.60,

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would be added per year to the average residential customer's water bill. The cost of replacing a few missing teeth can reach thousands of dollars.

The group, Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, headed up by Jeff Green, is up in arms about the issue. Green says that putting fluoride in the city's water supply is unnecessary and that time and money would be better spent on improving standards and availability of dental care, particularly for low income families whose children typically suffer more from tooth disease than in other richer communities.

"We were all told in the past that if fluoride was incorporated into the enamel of the tooth it would be more resistant to decay," Green said. "The real truth is that it actually doesn't work that way."

Green claims that studies show fluoride exists enough in certain foods children eat that even in non-fluoridated communities children are already receiving the suggested daily dose of 1 milligram of fluoride. To increase that amount, says Green, is unnecessary and could cause health repercussions. Green said that Citizens for Safe Drinking Water has prepared documentation that will be presented to the City Council during tonight's meeting.

"The act of adding fluoride to the water will contribute to the overdose (of fluoride)," Green said. "Our biggest question to the city is: why are we adding it to the water if we can show that people are getting enough already?"

Others feel just as strongly that fluoride will be good for Watsonville residents.

"We are hoping that the city will approve fluoridation as the most important public health act that they will undertake," said David McNutt, the health manager for Santa Cruz County. McNutt said certain allegations that excessive fluoride can actually serve to weaken people's teeth, as well as causing various other health problems, "have absolutely never been shown to be true."

In 1996 the state of California passed legislation which mandated fluoridation in community water systems with at least 10,000 service connections. Watsonville's water systems have approximately 13,000 service connections and is therefore subject to the legislature.

The Watsonville Fluoridation Committee estimated that the initial cost of installing a fluoridation system for the city would be roughly $750,000 and the costs for maintaining and operating the system would fall somewhere around $200,000 per year. An additional annual cost of $65,000 would be added to fund replacement of the fluoride equipment

The costs for Watsonville would be higher than average because its water supply is composed of a network of 11 smaller wells and the Corralitos Filter Plant, therefore the city would need to install 12 independent fluoridation injection systems in order to provide the proper amounts to all customers.

"We're hoping that the City Council will have an open mind about this issue," Green said.