

Count fluoride out of Watsonville

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Absentee ballot returns are showing that Measure S, the initiative that would ban fluoride or other additives from Watsonville's water, will soon be the law in the city of Watsonville. Friday's counting of the remaining absentee ballots shows 3,043 in favor of Measure S and 2,931 opposed. The

Fluoridation

Absentee ballots secure Measure S' lead

measure gained 80 votes after county officials tallied the remaining absentee ballots, up from its 32-vote lead after the Nov. 5 election.

Nearly 10,500 absentee ballots still needed to be counted after the initial returns began to come back

on election night. County officials prepared the absentee ballots for nearly 10 days before counting them Friday.

The task of preparing the votes proved to be quite an endeavor as election officials scrambled to co-

ordinate the remaining ballot count.

"First we had to divide the 10,500 ballots by district," said Gail Pellerin of the County Elections Department. "We then had to put indicators in front of and behind

the ballots to further divide them by precinct."

After the ballots had been properly organized, election officials fed them into the ballot counting machine where they were compiled and posted on the Internet.

Members of the Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, the main backers of Measure S, waited only

See FLUORIDE, page 6

FLUORIDE

From page 1

feet away from the counting machines, closely monitoring the election.

"I was so nervous coming here," said Maureen Jones, a member of Citizens for Safe Drinking Water. "I felt like I was going to the electric chair."

But fry she did not. Instead she walked away with one more victory in her group's quest to prevent fluoridation of municipal water supplies across the country. Watsonville doesn't mark Jones's only victory this election season. A similar measure using the exact same wording recently passed in Redding, California. Jones was able to name seven cities across the country that rejected fluoridation of their water supplies during the November 2002 election.

Members of the Citizens for Safe Drinking Water were nervous as they arrived at the County building at 11 a.m. to oversee the process, but by 11:20 they had taken a strong lead that they never lost.

Nick Bulaich, spokesperson for the group, said, "this is the third time that Watsonville voters have rejected untested, industrial waste fluorides to be dumped in their drinking water. Since the State of California has a three-strikes-your-out law, it is definitely time for that law to apply to the people who want to dump a toxic waste into the drinking water of Watsonville."

Opponents of Measure S said they were surprised the election was so close. "I can't believe that we did so well," explained Laurie Hester, treasurer for the No on Measure S campaign. "I personally never thought that we were going to win. We were really surprised that we got so many votes when the opposition was introducing such a confusing and misleading ballot question," Hester said.

Hester added that her group will ignore Measure S, and will push to have Watsonville's water fluoridated anyway. "This was our intention from the beginning. There was never any doubt that we were going to push forward with fluoridation whether the measure passed or not," said Hester, who argued that Measure S was so confusing that she believed it could be overthrown on those grounds alone. "Besides, we have state law on our side," said Hester, referring to a California law requiring cities to fluoridate if outside funds are available.

Never has a city in California been forced to fluoridate their water after passing an initiative that banned the additive.

The battle to fluoridate turned into a war of words over the last weeks of campaigning with anti-Measure S forces calling the ordinance's backers "terrorists," "junk scientists" and "carpet baggers."

While Maureen-Jones lives in San Jose and travels around fighting fluoridation all over the country, the measure had plenty of local support, including the famed Watsonville apple cider producer the Martinelli family. Of the three main activists against Measure S — Dr Jim Jacobson, Santa Cruz City Council Member Cynthia Mathews, and Hester — none of them live in Watsonville.

Elections officials said that 1,500 provisional votes remain to be counted for the entire county. Elections officials estimate that about 160 ballots in Watsonville still need to be counted, after the eligibility of the voters for the various ballots are determined. While there remains a slight possibility that Measure S could fail after those votes are counted, the chances are slim.