

# State threat escalates Watsonville's fluoride war

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**WATSONVILLE** — The Watsonville fluoride war is not over.

More than three months after city voters rejected the prospect of adding fluoride to the public water supply, the state is poised to force the city to do just that.

State health officials told the city they plan to issue a compliance letter within a few weeks telling the city to proceed with fluoridation plans or face \$200 per day fines, City Manager Carlos Palacios said Wednesday.

"They told me they were serious," Palacios said. "They're not joking."

In November city voters approved a measure that, though it didn't mention fluoride by name, barred adding the chemical to the water supply.

However, a 1997 state law mandates that cities with 10,000 or more water hookups fluoridate their water — if the money is available. State Attorney General Bill Lockyer, in a February 2000 opinion, said that state law takes precedence over local ones.

Watsonville last year secured an almost \$1 million grant from the California Dental Health Foundation to install the needed fluoridation equipment and operate the system for a year. The city even solicited bids to install the equipment.

After voters approved Measure S in November with a 51 percent majority, the city wrote the foundation saying it would reject the grant. In January, the City Council refused bids on the installation contract.

That set the stage for a showdown with the state Department of Health Services, and the city has been waiting for the state to make its next move.

Obviously, fluoride opponents want the city to stand by its voters.

"At this point the only thing the state has done is verbally threaten (the city)," said Nick Bulaich, a spokesman for the group Citizens for Safe Drinking Water, which petitioned to get Measure S on the ballot. "What I expect is for the council to tell the state to buzz off."

Fluoride supporters include Dientes! Commu-

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CITIZENS FOR SAFE DRINKING WATER

## Water

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nity Dental Clinic and the Monterey Bay Medical Society, among others.

In November, five of the seven council members were fluoride supporters, with Betty Bobeda and Judy Doering-Nielson supporting the measure. Bobeda did not seek re-election in November.

The measure barred chemicals not approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration from being added to the public water supply, but exempted chemicals like chlorine used to make water safer. The FDA does not regulate fluoride, a point fluoride backers say their foes used to confuse

voters and a point fluoride opponents say proves the chemical is suspect.

Fluoridation has been a lightning-rod issue in the Western United States, though about 62 percent of the country has fluoridated water. About 28 percent of Californians had fluoridated water as of 2000, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control.

The Santa Cruz City Council passed an anti-fluoride ordinance in 1998 and voters in the city of Santa Cruz passed an anti-fluoridation measure in 1999. There was much talk of the state forcing the issue at that time, but it never did.

The difference here is that Watsonville had the money promised to it. Jim Jacobson, an area dentist who

chaired a pro-fluoride committee in the Watsonville election, said the state should enforce its laws.

"The state has not stepped up to the plate to enforce its laws," Jacobson said Wednesday.

He said the Attorney General's Office must do what the Department of Health Services has not.

Groups like the American Dental Association say fluoride combats tooth decay. Opponents scoff at that claim and say the public shouldn't have chemicals or medications forced upon it via the water supply.

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