

# Fluoride tally due today

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SANTA CRUZ — Anti-fluoridation Measure N remained undecided Wednesday with county elections officials promising to finish counting ballots by 3 p.m. today.

By the time the count ended on election night Tuesday, the measure was winning by 53 votes, but 351 ballots remained uncounted.

Those ballots included 204 absentees, 79 "provisional" ballots that appeared questionable, and 68 rejected by the electronic counters because they had been ripped, torn or had been written on.

"There's some things written on those rejected ballots that can't be printed in a family newspaper," said Gail Pellerin, Santa Cruz County elections manager.

Measure N is intended to block a state mandate to add fluoride to the city's drinking water, which is supplied to about 88,000 people in and out of the city.

As it stood Wednesday, Measure N was winning by a count of 4,274 votes to 4,221.

"Things are going along, but it takes time to re-check all those extra ballots and verify all the ballots we received," Pellerin said.

On Wednesday, rather than complete an unofficial count, Pellerin decided it would be easier to complete a double-checked final count today.

"At that point we will be saying this is our official count," she said.

Elections officials experienced a similar but longer delay when compiling results from the November 1998 race for a Watsonville City Council seat. In that race, between incumbent Dennis Osmer and eventual

winner Ramon Gomez, it took two weeks for officials to declare a winner.

Though the odds of pulling out a victory appeared slim, fluoride advocates were unwilling to concede on Wednesday.

They were banking on the absentee ballots, largely because the pro-fluoride side fared well in the early returns Tuesday. Measure N was failing by 447 votes after the 3,025 absentee ballots turned in before Election Day were counted.

Fluoride advocates said they were pleased the vote was as close as it was. While most people may favor fluoride, anti-fluoride activists were more likely to turn out to vote in a special, one-issue election, they said.

Those in favor of Measure N said fluoride supporters were continuing to insult the public's intelligence. Fluoride opponents maintain that fluoride is toxic and that the government should not be allowed to medicate the public, no matter what its intentions.

Measure N would prohibit the use of city water to deliver products or substances intended to affect the physical or mental functions of consumers. It would not extend to substances such as chlorine intended to keep drinking water clean, said city Water Director Bill Kocher.

If Measure N passes, it will replace an existing city ordinance that already prohibits fluoride. Even if Measure N fails, the existing ordinance will stand.

State law passed last year mandates eventual fluoridation of water systems serving more than 10,000 people.

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