

Council snubs state law on fluoridation

City leaves question to voters

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Fluoridation
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SANTA CRUZ — A divided City Council voted 4-2 Tuesday to leave the question of fluoridating the municipal water supply to a vote of the people.

Don't expect to go to the polling booth anytime soon, though.

The council's vote was more to head off a state intrusion into city business than it was a statement that they want residents to decide whether the water should be fluoridated.

In fact, the ordinance tentatively approved Tuesday was a compromise that was quickly fashioned after it became clear the original proposal to simply refuse the state's fluoridation mandate could only muster three votes on the six-member council.

(The seventh council member, school teacher Mary Beth Campbell, was not at the meeting because she was attending an education conference.)

Even the revised ordinance — which must pass a final vote after another public hearing in two weeks — failed to gain the support of council members Cynthia Matthews and Michael Hernandez.

The two were in favor of adding fluoride to the city's water supply, saying they had been convinced by statistical evidence that such treatment reduced dental problems for young people, especially in low-income families that don't have access to dental care.

Mayor Celia Scott and council members Mike Rotkin and Katherine Beiers all strongly favored rebuffing the state with the ordinance declaring that there were too many health-care concerns about fluoridating water to risk adding it to local water.

They cautioned the more strident opponents that they didn't buy into all the wide-ranging accusations, such as fluoride is being dumped on an unsuspecting citizen by uncaring corporate America looking to get rid of toxic waste.

"Personally I suspect the truth

about fluoride is it's not a panacea ... and that it's not yet an unmitigated health-care disaster," said Scott.

But, she added, enough studies point to potential problems to make a more cautious route the best one.

Standing in the middle was Vice Mayor Scott Kennedy, who suggested that the studies weren't that clear-cut, and that advocates of fluoridation had been persuasive.

He's the one who suggested fashioning a more neutral ordinance that would challenge the state's authority to force the city to fluoridate the water, while leaving open the issue of what Santa Cruz's position is on the issue.

Should a local decision on the fluoridation issue be required, it would come from a vote of the people.

Although only half of what anti-fluoridation forces wanted, the decision left a lot of people smiling because it didn't simply accept the state's 1996 mandate.

The state Legislature passed a law that year that demanded all public water systems with at least 10,000 connections start putting fluoride in the water supply. No money is available to help carry out that mandate, and the state may leave it to private foundations to provide the necessary funding down the road.

City Attorney John Barisone said the law doesn't apply to charter cities as long as the council goes on record opposing the mandate.

State officials said Tuesday, however, that such a position likely will be challenged in court.

The reason the council wanted to go on record supporting a local decision-making policy on this issue is because Santa Cruz is ranked 12th on the state's ladder for adding fluoridation once money becomes available.

The ordinance will go into effect after a second reading, likely to be in two weeks.