

Fluoridation

# Water fluoridation controversy to be put to public vote in November

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There may be a fluoride measure on the city ballot this fall, but the word "fluoride" will be as noticeably absent from the measure as a missing front tooth.

## WATSONVILLE

This week, the City Council begrudgingly agreed to put a measure on the November ballot that, if approved by voters, would prohibit the city from adding any chemical to the city's water supply not approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration. The measure doesn't mention fluoride, but was proposed by a group of residents opposed to fluoride, which is added to many municipal water supplies to prevent tooth decay.

It was a tough decision to swallow for some council members. The council has voted overwhelmingly in support of fluoridation in the past. The move was more pro-democratic process than

anti-fluoride, according to councilman Chuck Carter.

"I don't like the way the initiative is worded," Carter said. "(But) the citizens went out and got the signatures to (put the measure on the ballot), and I'm not going to trump the rights of citizens."

Council members Rafael Lopez and Ana Ventura Phares called the initiative's wording "misleading." Richard De La Paz questioned why fluoridation opponents didn't come right out and use the "F" word since that was the reason behind the initiative.

"We have taken the higher ground," said Nick Bulaich, a fluoridation opponent. "We want no chemical whatsoever (in the water), other than to make the water potable."

Mayor Betty Bobeda, Carter, De La Paz and Ramon Gomez voted to place the measure on the ballot, while Lopez and Ventura Phares voted against it.

Members of Watsonville Citizens for Safe

Drinking Water, a group that opposes fluoridation, called the decision "a hard-fought victory."

But whether the measure has any legal bearing, or if it will even make it to the ballot at all, is unclear. During the discussion, City Attorney Alan Smith pointed out the FDA does not regulate tap water, and the state attorney general in 2000 said fluoride must be added to water supplies if an agency has the money to do it.

In April, the city accepted a nearly \$1 million grant to fund the installation of fluoridation treatment equipment and cover operations and maintenance costs for one year. According to the state Department of Health Services, the city must fluoridate within two years now that it has received funding.

If the state presses the issue, the ballot measure could possibly be brought to a tooth-grinding halt.

Still, the council was between a rock and a hard place, according to Smith. He advised the members they could either choose to continue

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with fluoridation efforts, "and someone would sue and get an injunction to stop you," or they could choose not to fluoridate "and the attorney general will sue to make you."

An opinion was prepared earlier this month by the state Legislative Counsel at the request of Assemblymen Fred Keeley and Simon Salinas. It emphasized "existing state law mandates fluoridation of water systems serving more than 10,000 service hook-ups, when funding is provided," according to Cynthia Mathews with the Watsonville Fluoridation Committee, a group supporting fluoridation.

Fluoridation has been in place since 1945 and serves 62 percent of the country's population. Still, the issue has been hard to digest for some in Santa Cruz County. In March 1998, the Santa Cruz City Council adopted an ordinance prohibiting the addition of fluoride to its system.

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