



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Watsonville Water Operation Supervisor Keith Kimes walks along the pipe that brings water from the Corralitos Creek Intake to the city's filtering system Monday after checking the flow of the creek. Water coming from it and municipal wells must be fluoridated, the state says.

Watsonville in no hurry to fluoridate

By **DONNA JONES**
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WATSONVILLE — When the city lost a court case to the state more than a year ago, its long-running battle against water fluoridation appeared over.

But Watsonville residents continue to drink fluoride-free water, and don't look for the tooth-decay fighting compound to flow from taps anytime soon. It will take more than a year to build a fluoridation system, and there's no telling when the work will start.

Six months after the California Dental Association Foundation offered the city \$1.6 million for the construction, the terms of the grant remain in dispute.

"It's very frustrating," said Dr. Dennis Baluyut, a Watsonville den-

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tist who favors fluoridation. "The result is more kids incurring a lot of dental decay."

City officials say questions need to be answered before they accept the grant, not the least of which is whether the funding will fully cover costs and who will bear the liability if legal challenges emerge.

"It's not that we're dragging our feet," said Councilman Dale Skillicorn, a fluoridation foe. "There's significant concerns within the [grant]

offer that have to be resolved."

Still, there's little urgency, with strong opposition among residents — who approved an anti-fluoridation measure in 2002 — and mixed feelings on the City Council, and the city isn't the only one in no rush.

Watsonville officials waited three months for the foundation to reply to a letter outlining the city's concerns, and when Jon Roth, the dental foundation's executive director, called City Manager Carlos Palacios two weeks ago, it was to arrange a conference call for mid-August.

Roth said vacations and foundation work on other projects delayed the response. He said Watsonville isn't the first to request changes to grant terms, but none have been this extensive. Some projects have

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been much larger. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, for example, is in the final stages of building a system that will bring fluoridated water to 18 million people in the Los Angeles basin.

Roth said he's confident the city's issues can be resolved.

"We understand the city wants to feel very comfortable moving forward," he said. "This has been sort of a front-page issue for them."

State health officials, whose 2002 fluoridation order sparked Watsonville's losing court battle, are putting pressure on the city, most recently asking for a timetable. But city officials believe until they have cash in hand, the state can't force fluoridation.

Ken August, a spokesman for the state Department of Health, said state officials will negotiate a schedule with the city.

Many Watsonville water customers aren't in any hurry.

Opponents urged the council to reject the grant outright. They are concerned about possible health risks, and they don't like being

forced to fluoridate.

Barbara Lyons, who lives outside Watsonville but gets her water from the city, said the council is doing its job by asking questions. She said many studies raise doubts about fluoridation.

"The sheer weight of the evidence against fluoride has already convinced most people," Lyons said.

But major medical and dental groups, including the American Dental Association, back fluoridation, and say reputable research concludes it's a safe, effective way to prevent cavities.

Baluyut, the Watsonville dentist, sees problem mouths in his work at Salud Para La Gente's dental clinic. Many children come from poor families with limited access to dental care, he said.

"That's why we're pushing for fluoridation," Baluyut said.

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