



Brown water debate bubbles up

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The city is defending a decision to filter the drinking water at city hall, saying it addresses a problem tenants had with discoloured water.

But critics argue that the \$20,000 paid to bring in the water filters, plus another \$700 recently spent for a water bottle filling station in a staff lunch room, is setting a double standard for taxpayers.

Those services aren't being provided to other Waterloo citizens who have had similar problems over the years with dirty water.

And some say it sends out the wrong message about the quality of the city's drinking water, especially during the controversial fluoridation debate set for a plebiscite this October.

David Calder, the city's manager of corporate services, said he doesn't think it set a double standard. The city put in the service in February, 2008 to address tenant's complaints at the City Centre building about discoloured water.

"It was for the our whole building so anybody, including our tenants, that gets water through the water mains that come into the building — it goes through that filter," said Calder.

The Chronicle has since learned that the two tenants whose initial complaints sparked the changeover to filtered water, an insurance company and restaurant, have since left the city centre building.

Coun. Karen Scian waded into the debate on her blog and took umbrage at the attempt to link the concern to the fluoride debate.

The city's filtration system doesn't filter out the fluoride, and in fact it's almost impossible to find a system that does.

"It does not filter out fluoride," she said. "So by making it into a fluoride issue, I think, was ridiculous."

But Scian said she was unfamiliar with wider discoloured water problems around the city, and said she hasn't received any complaints about the issue from her constituents.

"All it is about discoloured water and giving our employee an option in filling their water bottles with tap water," said Scian.

"It's a matter of opinion that water quality is an issue, because I don't feel water quality is an issue.

"Our tap water is perfectly safe."

Residents contacted by the Chronicle about the brown water issue in previously hard hit areas like Lincoln Village said they wished the city would have considered filtering their water.

Instead they had to do it on their own, and resorted to drinking bottled water to address some of their concerns.

"I do find it rather strange that the city would install a water filtering system for staff, while trying to convince residents that our tap water is safe to drink," said one resident who didn't wish to be identified because of the fallout he dealt with last time over the issue.

Former City Coun. Gary Kieswetter, who represented the ward until 2006, said residents never did get a satisfactory answer to the problem.

"And nobody stepped forward to offer to put filters on," he said. "They had to spend their own money to filter their own water.

"Now I wonder if it wasn't a problem. If the city needs to do this for brown water at city hall, then something is wrong."

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