City votes for another plebiscite on fluoridation

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The issue of whether or not the city's water should be fluoridated will be taken to the people in 2010.

Maybe.

City council decided last night to add a plebiscite on water fluoridation to the ballot in the next municipal election.

But the city does not have the final say. The region, which is in charge of treating the water, must grant Waterloo permission to hold the vote, according to provincial legislation.

Waterloo's council voted 5-3 Monday in favour of sending a request to the region in order to hold a plebiscite. The request will be sent out by the end of the week, but after that it's up to the region to decide when to deal with it.

The motion also asks the region to work with the city on a public information campaign to educate the voters before the election.

If allowed, the 2010 plebiscite will mark the fourth time the city's electorate has voted on the issue.

Voters cast their ballots in favour of fluoridation in the other three votes, the last of which was held in 1982.

"If you look at the intervals between previous plebiscites, this needs to go back to the public," said Coun. Scott Witmer.

The fluoridation issue heated up again recently after a local watchdog group presented council and media with research that shows that hydrofluorosilicic acid, the chemical compound that's used to add fluoride to the water, can also contribute contaminants like lead and arsenic to the water supply.

There's evidence that the addition of this compound can do more harm than good, according to Mitra Doherty, a local dentist.

"Dentists as well as the public are not told the truth about the source of fluoride in our water," Mitra told council

She only found out about the use of hydrofluorosilicic acid five years ago. Most of the public believes that the fluoride in water is pharmaceutical grade, not industrial waste, she added.

But the use of the acid is approved by the province and is safe, said Liana Nolan, the region's medical officer of health.

Nolan said the main reason for fluoridation is simple -- it prevents tooth decay.

"Fluoride prevents cavities. It works by coating our teeth and making them stronger," she said.

Nolan also addressed concerns about heightened lead and arsenic levels.

"The level of arsenic is so low it is not detectable," she said. And while there have been cases of high lead levels, most can be attributed to poor piping, she said.

With an abundance of information on both sides of the issue, council was conflicted about what to do.

Coun. Diane Freeman proposed a plebiscite be held within six months, while Coun Jan d'Ailly, wanted to hold off on the plebiscite and enter a series of public information meetings to gauge public interest.
Coun. Angela Vieth, on the other hand, wanted an immediate stop to fluoridation. Vieth cited research that showed water fluoridation is ineffective, and only topical application of the substance prevents tooth decay.

"It's like going to the beach and drinking sunscreen so you don't get sunburned," she said.

Ultimately council decided to go with staff's recommendation to hold the vote in 2010, with d'Ailly, Freeman and Vieth voting against the motion.

Council also chose to support the formation of an Ontario Fluoridation Office, which would be an independent body that would study the effects of fluoride.

"This has been quite a debate in the community for many years," said Mayor Brenda Halloran.

"It's not going to be over tonight."

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