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Council must stay out of fluoride debate it started

BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — Council has been told that Ontario law bars Waterloo council, staff and committees from participating in the fluoride referendum that council demanded.

Politicians are now uncertain if they can keep a pledge to help educate the public about fluoride, which is added to drinking water to prevent cavities.

"You've allowed the clock to run out on the public," anti-fluoride activist Robert Fleming complained to council. "What a mess."

Regional government is holding the referendum next fall during the municipal election, expected Oct. 25. It will also have to steer clear of the debate, except for Dr. Liana Nolan, who may continue to promote fluoridation as the medical officer of health.

"There's no role for the city in this," Coun. Mark Whaley said.

Coun. Jan d'Ailly had hoped the city could help sponsor a "respectful debate" until advised the city can't get involved. "I have no doubt both sides will put up a good fight," he said.

The ballot question on fluoride must be confirmed by April 27, assuming an October election. After that, the Municipal Elections Act treats the referendum like a candidate campaigning for office, and local governments must stay out of campaigns, city staff have advised council.

Nolan is exempt from restrictions because she has special status, independent of regional government.

Waterloo's environmental advisory committee had planned to research fluoride issues but can't do so after April.

Waterloo water has been fluoridated since 1967. Leading health organizations say the widespread practice is safe but critics disagree.

This will be Waterloo's third fluoride referendum. It will include residents in St. Jacobs, Elmira and a few other neighbourhoods that receive fluoridated water. Kitchener and Cambridge do not fluoridate their water.

Anybody who campaigns on fluoride must behave like an election candidate. This means registering, recording contributions, complying with spending limits and filing financial statements.

Councillors and members of municipal advisory committees may participate but only as individuals and using no public funds. Council has been advised not to allow fluoride delegations at council meetings.

The city will be allowed to present fact-based information on the current fluoridation process, publicize debates hosted by impartial third parties, such as the media or a community voter group, and publicize opportunities to help draft the ballot question.

The referendum result is not expected to be binding due to low turnout. Politicians have suggested they will respect the result.

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