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Critics argue city stifling fluoride debate

Bob Vrbanac, Chronicle Staff

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With the water fluoridation plebiscite set for the October 2010 municipal election you'd think the City of Waterloo would ask both opponents and supporters of the practice to open their mouths wide.

But a move to equate the yes and no sides to election campaigners under the Municipal Elections Act, passed in December, has stifled some of the debate, critics charge.

Instead of promoting open forums, as the city promised, it will now be up to impartial citizens groups like the former members of the Voter Support Committee to host the debate.

"It's not right that citizens can't speak and have a say in this, and that they'll be muzzled after April," said Coun. Angela Vieth, an opponent of water fluoridation.

That has WaterlooWatch executive director Robert Fleming arguing that instead of using the Municipal Elections Act, the enabling legislation — the Fluoridation Act — should be used. That would take off the restrictions now placed on those who are actively campaigning to get fluoride out of the local water supply, as well as those trying to keep it in.

Especially since its been determined that there is no way that the vote will reach the standard of getting more than 50 per cent of the electorate to participate in the vote. At best that makes it a straw poll, Fleming argued, and it should be treated as such.

Fleming has already tried to register as a campaigner. But he wouldn't commit until the City Clerk's office could tell him where in the act it says the same rules apply to opponents and proponents of the planned plebiscite as they do to those seeking office.

He said he was still waiting for a response from the clerk's office Monday.

"It's been totally glossed over," he said. "There's been no such dialogue about why this even belongs under the Municipal Elections Act and nobody has explained why or offered legal argument why, or show any legal precedent where they even can."

Fleming said the city should put it to a simple opinion poll whether residents want it on or off that isn't necessarily tied to the next municipal election. That debate will allow a free exchange of ideas.

"I think what has happened here is that the politicians don't want to make a decision that they must make in the face of facts," said Fleming. "It's either all on or all off."

"Other municipalities have had the courage to make that decision."

Coun. Vieth said there were no discussions, that she's aware of on whether the planned plebiscite should fall under the Fluoridation Act or under the Municipal Election Act.

"We've never had any discussion as a council with legal on this," said Vieth. "I don't even know why we have to have it as part of the municipal election."

She said that council's move to treat everybody involved with the debate as a campaigner has potentially silenced some important voices in the debate. For instance, the Waterloo Citizens Environmental Advisory Committee was studying the impact of fluoride water



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"They've been muzzled." – Coun. Angela Vieth on restrictions placed on city committees including the WCEAC

on the environment and preparing a report.

Council's move means that nobody involved with the city sponsored committee can be involved in an election campaign issue like fluoridation.

"They've been muzzled," said Vieth. "Why not take this right out of the Municipal Election Act and conduct it as a public opinion poll. That way people don't have to spend money or register as a candidate to speak on this issue.

"That will make it more open to the community and the citizens to have a say."

Coun. Karen Scian, a supporter of water fluoridation, doesn't agree much with Vieth on the debate, but she too is concerned about the apparent move to stifle discussion.

"My perspective is that this didn't do anybody any favours," said Scian. "If we're going to have the debate, have it.

"It doesn't do anybody any favours to muzzle them on this thing."

She's said this issue has been clouded by all the diverging opinions that have been offered over the last two years, and the recent developments involving the water fluoridation system being shut off for repairs hasn't helped.

"This is probably the muddiest issue we've had to deal with, and personally I don't think it's something that needed to come forward," said Scian. "The information we've received from all sides has been confusing so I don't even know if there's a right answer.

"Could it have been handled differently? Probably. Would it have put us in a different place? Probably not."

She said she just wants the public to decide and finally put the issue to rest.

"I like to see this answer be an answer so we can move forward," said Scian about the upcoming vote. "Even if the vote is non-binding, as a politician I certainly respect the outcome of this vote."

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