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Critics worried about the flow of information on fluoridation

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The fluoride debate is moving out of council chambers.

Come April, the City of Waterloo will discontinue any discourse on fluoridation during council meetings.

The question of whether to fluoridate water in Waterloo will be the subject of a vote during the next municipal election

The decision to halt debate in city hall came after staff advised councillors that under Ontario's Municipal Election Act, proponents and opponents of any questions being asked in an election are treated the same as political candidates.

Robert Fleming, executive director of Waterloo Watch, wondered how the city could backtrack from its previous position of facilitating debate while the other side is getting a voice from within the region.

He's worried that without the city providing information and holding debates, not enough information will get out to the public.

According to advice from the city solicitor the municipality can't favour one side or another in the debate — or offer any opinion at all.

The advice was contrary to a motion passed in September, in which council agreed to help facilitate the debate.

"I'm not comfortable taking a passive role in this," Coun. Karen Scian said at Monday night's council meeting.

"I'm not happy with stepping away from a commitment we made."

As a compromise, city staff will come back in the New Year with options in which the city can legally facilitate the debate. That could mean seeking out third parties who can run debates or open houses or hand out neutral fact sheets.

The most important part is that it follows the letter of the law, said Coun. Mark Whaley, who opposed the city having any role in the fluoride debate.

"The election act says the city should be neutral and I have no fear that either side will have a problem getting their message out," he said.

While it's unclear what the city will be allowed to do, it's clear what won't be allowed.

City councillors and people sitting on any advisory committees are not be permitted to express their opinions while acting as a spokesperson for the committee.

Members of the Waterloo Citizens Environmental Advisory Committee, which has been discussing the fluoride matter for months, will not be able to comment on the matter.

They are, however, allowed to appear at debates and provide their personal opinions when they are not acting as a member of the committee.

Opponents of fluoridation saw the move as a way to silence their voice.

The Region of Waterloo, which is the body with the power to turn off the fluoride and the municipality that will be administering the vote, will take a neutral stance like the City of Waterloo.

But Dr. Liana Nolan, the chief medical officer of health and a regional employee, will be allowed to express her views on the matter because her position is independent of regional council.

Nolan has already expressed her views as pro-fluoridation and information on the region's website supports the practice.

"Waterloo citizens are not being served well," Fleming told councillors. "If you are struggling here, imagine how the public must be struggling.

"What a mess."

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