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End of the line

Regional council votes to stop water fluoridation

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Water fluoridation in the city will end on Nov. 29 despite last-minute concerns raised by local dentists.

Regional councillors voted unanimously Tuesday to accept the results of October's fluoride referendum.

In the plebiscite 50.3 per cent of voters in Waterloo, as well as portions of Kitchener and Woolwich Township said no to fluoridation, while 49.7 voted in favour of continuing the practice.

"We made a commitment as a council to citizens that we would uphold the results of the referendum," Coun. Sean Strickland said. "Our word and our honour have to be upheld."

The fluoride will stop flowing at noon on Nov. 29. It will cost an estimated \$50,000 to stop the process.

Members of the Waterloo-Wellington Dental Association had a different take on the referendum results than regional councillors.

"The no side won by only 196 votes," said Dr. Sanjay Uppal, president of the local dental association.

"The outcome doesn't come near to reflecting the demographics of the community."

Under provincial law, the results of the fluoride referendum would only have been binding if 50 per cent of eligible voters had participated. In Waterloo, voter turnout was approximately 42 per cent.

In May 2008, regional council passed a resolution that the municipality would accept a simple majority as binding. That decision wasn't made clear, Uppal said.

"I'm not sure there was really any clarity about whether the vote was binding or not," he said, adding that more people would have come out and voted if they had known the process.

Uppal argued that since less than half of those eligible voted and the vote came down to the wire, it was really a minority of residents who wanted fluoridation discontinued.

The referendum also didn't give voice to those who fluoridation helps the most, said Dr. Harry Hoediono, a Waterloo resident who practices in Kitchener and president-elect of the Ontario Dental Association.

"I'm here to speak on behalf of four-and five-year-olds, for seniors, for veterans," he told regional councillors. "We've let a minority group of misinformed people make a public health decision."

"If we pass this bylaw, we set dental and medical care back 100 years. We go back to the dark ages."

Regional chair Ken Seiling said he was concerned that fluoridation was ending in Waterloo, but wondered why dentists weren't more vocal in their support of the practice during the campaign.

The region was legally obligated to stay out of the debate, Seiling added.

It's not the place of dentists to campaign for fluoridation, Hoediono said.

"It would be ethically incorrect for me to do that."

But the region should listen to dental expertise when making decisions, he added.

Anti-fluoridationists stayed out of Tuesday's debate, except to encourage the region to develop dental health programs using the money saved from stopping fluoride.

Robert Fleming, executive director of WaterlooWatch, urged council to use the money to provide toothbrushes, toothpaste and education about dental hygiene.

"It's time our community set aside our differences . . . and collectively address dental caries," he said. The region's public health unit will undertake a number of measures in the new year, including a review of region-wide dental education, said Dr. Liana Nolan, chief medical officer of health for Waterloo Region.

Public health will also undertake a study to see the health effects the removal of fluoride has on the community.

"We do need to follow this up," said Waterloo Mayor Brenda Halloran, who stated during her re-election campaign that she supports fluoridation.

"We need to collect verifiable proof either way over the next four years."

While many in the community will not be pleased with the result of the referendum and council's subsequent decision, it does have some historical precedent, said Coun. Jane Mitchell.

"When (fluoridation) was voted on two times before, the yes side won in a squeaker," Mitchell said.

"The people of Waterloo have spoken."

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