

Fluoride weeks away from removal after No vote

BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — Fluoride may remain in Waterloo tap water until the end of the year, pending a council bylaw and equipment shutdown.

Voters rejected water fluoridation by 50.3 per cent in the Oct. 25 referendum, the No side winning by 195 votes. Here's a timeline suggested by politicians and bureaucrats:

? Regional councillors will review referendum results Nov. 16. Council passed a resolution in 2008 to "implement the simple majority result."

? If councillors reject fluoride as expected, council will confirm the decision with a required bylaw Nov. 24.

? Staff will then start turning off fluoride equipment at four water treatment sites.

This will bring Waterloo, which has added fluoride since 1967, in line with Kitchener and Cambridge, which do not fluoridate tap water.

St. Jacobs, Elmira and a small part of Kitchener will also lose fluoridated water. They share the same water supply, also narrowly voted no, and are part of the simple majority against fluoride.

"That's so exciting," said Waterloo Coun. Angela Vieth, who helped lead the No campaign. "I'd be thrilled for it to be off by the end of this year."

The referendum is not binding. But Vieth and Regional Chair Ken Seiling, who voted yes to fluoride, expect council to end fluoridation as promised.

"I think that would create a great deal of cynicism, if we said we'd accept a majority vote, and then turn around and try and overturn it because we didn't like the result," Seiling said.

Authorities could not say if shutting down fluoride will take days or weeks after council orders it. Water staff will have to disconnect equipment, consult with provincial regulators, cancel orders with suppliers, and remove decommissioned equipment.

"It could take until the end of the year," said Thomas Schmidt, regional commissioner of environmental services. "We would obviously not have any untoward delay in getting the work done."

Fluoride is added to water in an effort to prevent cavities. Most Ontario tap water is fluoridated for this purpose.

Critics dispute scientific and public health assertions that the practice is safe and effective. But opponents failed to persuade voters in two previous Waterloo referendums, in 1981 and 1982.

This time, the No campaign mounted a vigorous effort over many months to persuade residents of dangers, knocking on doors and distributing brochures. The Yes campaign chose to skip two public forums, coming to life late in the campaign as dentists hosted an information forum and purchased advertising.

Was the Yes effort too little too late? "We did the best that we could when we were asked," said Kitchener dentist Dr. Harry Hoediono, president-elect of the Ontario Dental Association.

Vieth credits hard work by determined fluoride foes. "I think (dentists) were confident that everybody believed them," she said. "Why would they have to campaign hard?"

Vieth and Hoediono agree public health officials should now step up other efforts to fight tooth decay.

Waterloo actually went without fluoridation for six months in 2009 after equipment failed. Politicians sparked controversy by spending more than \$49,000 on repairs, rather than awaiting the referendum.

Schmidt expects some fluoridation equipment, such as chemical pumps, may be sold or recycled for other water treatment purposes. It has an estimated value of \$118,000 when new. It costs about \$45,000 a year to provide fluoridation.

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