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## Merger, fluoridation issues to be probed by referendum

**BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF**

WATERLOO REGION — Voters will add new chapters to old controversies in the Oct. 25 municipal election.

Residents in Kitchener and Waterloo will be asked if their councils should discuss a merger. A group of business and community leaders lobbied for the referendum.

Residents in Waterloo, St. Jacobs, Elmira and parts of Kitchener will be asked if they support the fluoridation of tap water. The referendum follows a request by some residents to remove fluoride.

Supporters of merger talks say the cities need to plan their future without needless rivalries, to compete for investment and talent on the world stage. They contend talks may not necessarily lead to a merger and are intended to build a better future.

"We need to put all that on the table, ask that, investigate that, and ultimately come up with a recommendation as to whether we should merge or not," said Yes supporter Tricia Siemens, of Words Worth Books in Waterloo. A website at [www.letstalkkw.com](http://www.letstalkkw.com) lists supporters of the Yes side.

Critics counter that the cities can compete with each other and the world without a costly, unnecessary union. They see the call for talks as a merger plot in disguise, predict discussions will be expensive and disruptive, complain that community identities would be threatened, and point to co-operation as the way forward.

"Waterloo's got everything to lose and nothing to gain," says Stan Rektor, a Waterloo resident who urged council not to support the referendum question. "Kitchener's got everything to gain and nothing to lose."

There's no evidence in play to support either position. The campaign, sometimes emotional, touches often on the challenges of a merger. It rarely touches on the reality that municipal services are already 60 per cent merged under Waterloo regional council.

Retired political science professor Robert Williams can see merit in the cities discussing a shared future. But the pitch for merger talks has been thin, he contends. Mostly, it seems about branding and perception. These strike him as marginal benefits.

"I'm not sure that the pro-merger people have actually brought anything to this debate," said Williams, of the University of Waterloo.

The vote will not bind politicians but candidates pledge to respect the results. If voters say yes, councils are expected to set up a process for discussions. The outgoing Waterloo council has pledged another referendum if a merger is negotiated.

This is the third time Waterloo voters have voted on water fluoridation.

Waterloo has added fluoride to its tap water since 1967 as a public health measure to fight tooth decay. Residents endorsed it by referendums in 1981 and 1982.

Kitchener and Cambridge do not fluoridate their water. Kitchener residents rejected it twice in referendums, the last time in 1967.

Most Ontario tap water is fluoridated. Proponents contend the weight of credible science strongly shows that adding fluoride strengthens tooth enamel and limits cavities, without known risks at recommended levels.

The practice is endorsed by leading health, medical and dental organizations. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control calls fluoridation one of the top 10 public health achievements of the last century.

"It is a safe and effective way to prevent tooth decay, for a large number of people at a low cost," Dr. Liana Nolan, the local medical officer of health, has explained.

A 2006 study found the rate of tooth decay in Waterloo schoolchildren at 32 per cent, below the rate of 33 per cent in Cambridge and 44 per cent in Kitchener.

Arguments for fluoridation can be found at [www.youroralhealth.ca](http://www.youroralhealth.ca).

Critics claim the chemical used to fluoridate drinking water is a threat. They dismiss scientific assertions that the practice is sound and effective. They allege health risks including cancer, bone disease and dental damage. They complain that fluoridation is a violation of personal rights.

"When did society agree to medicate people through the drinking water system?" said Robert Fleming, a leading critic.

Arguments against fluoridation can be found at [www.waterloowatch.com](http://www.waterloowatch.com).

Low turnout will likely make the vote non-binding but candidates pledge to respect the results. Meanwhile, both sides have courted controversy with campaign decisions.

Dentists for fluoridation debated critics in June, but declined to debate them in two later forums proposed by Waterloo council.

"We don't feel there's validity in giving them a platform," said Dr. Ira Kirshen, past-president of the Ontario Dental Association. This decision drew fire from the No side and upset some councillors.

Fleming now alleges the dentists who debated fluoridation critics in June violated the law governing referendum spending. He has gone before a justice of the peace to secure a November court date.

"They're trying to stifle the debate," responds Kirshen, a target of the court action.

Fleming denies this, saying he wants to preserve the referendum process. "It's not a tactic," he said. "I do not want to make this court filing an election issue."

Williams, the politics professor, doubts the anti-fluoride side will gain supporters by going to court against dentists. "I think they are not helping their view by being as aggressive as they are," he said.

Ontario has seen a wave of anti-fluoridation campaigns since 2008. Hamilton and other councils have voted to continue fluoridation. Niagara, Thunder Bay and other councils have balked at fluoridation.

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