

Referendum votes must be respected

EDITORIAL

The voters of Waterloo have spoken and when it comes to two important referendum questions their answer is a convincing "No."

No — fluoride should no longer be added to the city's drinking water, the majority agreed in Monday's municipal election. No — the new city council must not discuss a possible merger with the City of Kitchener, a majority also said.

While these referendum votes are not binding on the politicians the wishes of the majority must be respected. For this reason, the government of Waterloo Region must move quickly to end the fluoridation of Waterloo's water, which also goes to Elmira, St. Jacobs and a small part of Kitchener where voters were also part of the referendum. In addition, Waterloo's new city council should not enter into formal merger talks with its Kitchener counterpart.

This wasn't the outcome this newspaper editorially advocated. We thought the two neighbouring cities had much to gain and nothing to lose if they jointly considered the advantages as well as disadvantages of becoming one city. And we were persuaded by an overwhelming consensus of public health agencies — including Health Canada, the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Protection, that fluoridating water is a safe, effective way to improve oral health. Regardless of the referendum outcomes, neither issue will go way.

The merger vote shows a high number of people in both communities want to explore amalgamation. In fact, if you add up all the votes in the merger referendum — which was held in Kitchener as well as Waterloo, you'll see that 32,378 people (52 per cent) approved the talks while 29,936 (48 per cent) disapproved.

Of course, support was strongly centred in Kitchener and the opposition firmly planted in Waterloo where two out of three voters said no to merger talks. Such numbers explain why the merger talks will not proceed, but they also show why the issue will not disappear. The community is split. For now, the wisest course of action is for the two cities to continue to find news ways to co-operate without worrying about amalgamation.

Meanwhile, in voting against fluoridation, Waterloo voters have made their city into an open laboratory. If the antifluoridation camp is correct, there should, over time, be a demonstrable improvement in the health of residents. Meanwhile, there should be no increase in the rate of cavities. Remember, the people opposed to fluoridating water linked it to illnesses such as cancer and osteoporosis. Will there be less of both afflictions in Waterloo? And if not, why? And what happens if, as dentists predict, cavity rates rise, particularly among lower-income families?

Whatever questions remain for the antifluoridation movement, it can take credit for running a focused and disciplined referendum campaign. It's unfortunate the water fluoridation advocates such as the Ontario Dental Association didn't campaign as hard.

Arguably, it's time for Waterloo Region health officials and politicians to take up the cause. Dr. Liana Nolan, the local medical officer of health is unequivocal in her support for fluoridation. If regional government has faith in Dr. Nolan, and we think it should, staff and politicians should eventually get water fluoridation back on the public agenda — for Kitchener and Cambridge where no fluoride is added as well as Waterloo.

The referendum votes may have settled these issues for now. That's democracy. Tomorrow is another question. Just as earlier Waterloo referendums supporting fluoridation didn't prevent Monday's vote, it doesn't rule out a future referendum. That, too, is democracy.