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Region fumbled on fluoride file

The citizens of Waterloo are set to vote next year on whether they want the city to continue adding fluoride to their water supply. It will be the fourth time the question has arisen on a ballot since 1967, which suggests that it is an issue of some importance to the people who live there.

That's why it was so astonishing to learn this week that, unbeknownst to city council, Waterloo Region council and ordinary citizens, the city's water supply has not been fluoridated for at least six months.

The fluoridation systems serving all four of the city's water supplies at three separate sites broke down between March and May, and won't be back in full operation until year's end.

Such a confluence of calamity might simply be a coincidence, but for all four systems to die in a short period, and for it to take six months or more before they are put back in working order, raises questions about how well the region, which is responsible for ensuring Waterloo's water is fluoridated, is maintaining its fluoridation equipment.

The issue is not a life-or-death one. No one in Waterloo was harmed because since the spring their water, like the water in Kitchener or Cambridge which choose not to fluoridate their drinking water, contained no fluoride.

Nonetheless, the handling of the incident raises a whole series of red flags:

Most alarming is that regional water and health officials didn't bother, for months, to inform any elected officials – or the public – about the breakdown of the entire fluoridation system.

The regional medical officer of health, Dr. Liana Nolan, said she is required to report the failure of the fluoridation system if it has lasted longer than 90 days, and insists that she met that obligation. However, if she learned in the summer that the fluoridation system had been broken since the spring, she could likely have informed elected officials sooner than this week. And surely it's unacceptable that no one on regional staff bothered to inform elected officials even though the problem was going on for months and months.

That's how regional councillor Sean Strickland clearly sees it. "Staff had a duty to report this to us. Someone dropped the ball." He's right.

Secondly, it seems to be taking an awfully long time to get the problem fixed, and there doesn't seem to have been any attempt to cobble together a short-term quick fix to tide the city over until the major repairs are completed. Nor can anyone say how much it will cost to fix the equipment.

Thirdly, the region seems to be extraordinarily hazy about its fluoridation processes. It cannot say with any precision how much fluoridation costs, since fluoridation is just one of many duties of water works employees. It's time the region gave the public this information. Moreover, the region's internal communications seem as pathetically slow as its systems for informing the public: Nolan says it took some two months for her to determine if repairs to the fluoridation system had gone ahead.

The lack of fluoridation is almost a side issue, however. The handling of this issue raises deeper questions about flaws in the way the region and the city communicate, and in the way municipal civil servants keep elected officials abreast of matters on their watch.

Providing the public with a safe supply of water is one of the region's most important responsibilities. The region's handling of this matter will erode public confidence in its ability to manage the water supply efficiently and transparently.

Waterloo voters are going to be asked to determine next year if fluoridation is important. If they were to judge from the way the region has handled this incident, they would have to conclude that, as far as the region is concerned, fluoridation is way, way down on its list of priorities.

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