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Region has not fluoridated water for most of the year

BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — A startling revelation has ramped up the public health debate over whether to continue fluoridating the water in Waterloo.

It turns out regional government has not fluoridated Waterloo's drinking water for most of this year. Authorities blame broken equipment at all three sites where fluoride is added.

Even today, after some repairs, fluoridated water only reaches 41 per cent of the city. Full fluoridation is not anticipated to resume until the end of the year, after more repairs.

"Staff had a duty to report this to us," Coun. Sean Strickland said. "Someone dropped the ball."

He points to public health obligations to provide fluoride as well as "political sensitivities" around the contested practice.

"The system has been broken. It hasn't been given adequate attention. The community hasn't been advised, nor has regional council been advised," Strickland said.

"That's something that is regrettable and unfortunate and needs to be looked at quite seriously... Embarrassment is a word that comes to mind."

Dr. Liana Nolan, medical officer of health, revealed the extensive malfunctions Tuesday. Public health standards require her to notify councillors if fluoridation fails for more than 90 days due to maintenance or lack of fluoride supply.

Records show all of Waterloo was without fluoridation between May and October, a period of six months.

"I've met my obligation to report to the community," Nolan said.

Waterloo is the only local city that adds fluoride to its drinking water. It's a common public health practice, meant to help prevent cavities. Critics argue it's unsafe but prominent health organizations dismiss concerns.

Waterloo plans a public referendum on fluoridation during the 2010 municipal election. It will be the fourth civic vote since 1967. Fluoride is also added to water in St. Jacobs, Elmira and a part of Kitchener that shares a water supply.

"This is a disgrace, that citizens haven't been informed," said Waterloo Coun. Angela Vieth, a leading critic of fluoridation. "It makes me feel pretty duped."

The region has told critics that fluoridation is essential to improve dental care. Meanwhile, the system has actually been turned off, she said.

Vieth questions spending money to repair the equipment, since Waterloo may vote to turn it off next year.

"Why would they spend that money now?" she said. "Why don't they just leave it off, see what happens?"

Strickland said the region is obliged to continue fluoridating water until the public actually says stop.

Officials could not estimate the costs to repair the broken fluoride equipment. Also unknown is the annual operating cost to fluoridate water.

Vieth is upset these costs have not been made public. Strickland said estimates will be compiled and released.

Nolan said she was notified this summer that the fluoride equipment had broken down. It took a couple of months to determine if repairs had proceeded, she said.

"Once it became very clear that the repairs had not proceeded, I reported the information," she said. She referred other questions about the notification delay to the regional water department.

Natural fluoride levels in Waterloo water are not high enough to help prevent cavities, Nolan said.

Regional Chair Ken Seiling dismissed the controversy as a "tempest in a teapot" and said Nolan is not to blame for the late notification.

"It was just a breakdown in communication" at a lower staff level, he said. "There's no public harm done by this."

Regional environment commissioner Thomas Schmidt said officials are reviewing who knew what when, to understand why it took so long to reveal the lack of fluoridation.

"It's definitely not a low priority, having fluoridation in the system," he said.

Schmidt said it's unusual to have all fluoridation systems fail concurrently. He said repairs are proceeding as fast as they can.

"You're not going to go to Canadian Tire to find any of the equipment that we're talking about," he said. "Some of it is actually very customized."

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