

# Some Woolwich voters to enter fray over fluoridation | ObserverXtra.com By: Katie Edmonds

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October 22, 2010

When they head to the polls next week, voters in parts of Waterloo Region will be asked whether or not they support continuing to fluoridate their drinking water. The decision will impact many residents – including those who live in Elmira and St. Jacobs – but many people don't really know what fluoridation is, or how it affects us.

Residents of the City of Waterloo will decide the fate of fluoridation through the plebiscite. Because parts of Woolwich Township are supplied water from the city, residents there too will have a say.

Water in Elmira and St. Jacobs has been piped in from Waterloo since 1992, after Elmira's aquifers became contaminated with chemicals from the Uniroyal (now Chemtura) plant.

Robert Fleming heads a citizens' group that opposes the fluoridation of water in Waterloo. He contends that the science supporting fluoridation is out of date and the process adds traces of lead, arsenic and other contaminants to the water.

"We want to see fluoridation turned off until science proves the ingestion of fluoride reduces cavities and the ingestion of co-contaminants over our lifetime is safe."

Fleming said the residents of the two towns were never consulted on whether they wanted fluoride added to their water.

The City of Waterloo however, was torn apart by the fluoride debate in June 1981, when a narrow majority – 51 per cent – of residents voted to continue the practice. In November 1982, 59 per cent of voters favoured keeping fluoride in the water.

Regional clerk Kris Fletcher, who was clerk of Woolwich Township at the time, said in an earlier interview that the issue of fluoride was raised in the township back in the early 1990s, but was of secondary importance.

"The priority was to ensure that water was received in Elmira during that timeframe ... I was in Woolwich Township at the time that all that was going on, and I do remember discussions with the public saying they would be getting fluoridated water. Now, were they ever formally told that? I don't recall.

"But I do remember some discussions and debates – well, not so much debates as much as it was 'we need to get water, it's going to come through the Waterloo system, and that means it's fluoridated water.'"

The council of the day was certainly aware the water was fluoridated, she said.

Fluoride is added at regional treatment facilities before entering the City of Waterloo's distribution system, and from there is piped to Elmira and St. Jacobs.

"It's not that we have a watermain from Kitchener that feeds directly across to St. Jacobs and Elmira. It's fed through the Waterloo system and then across to St. Jacobs," explained Nancy Kodousek, director of water services for the region.

That means fluoride can't be added to one municipality's water system and not the other.

Fluoridation in Waterloo is done by adding hydrofluorosilicic acid to the water, with a fluoride content between 0.5 and 0.8 parts per million (ppm.) Public health agencies, including Region of Waterloo Public Health, support water fluoridation as a means to reduce cavities.

Too much fluoride can cause dental fluorosis in children whose teeth are still forming, evident as white areas or brown stains on the teeth. High levels of fluoride over a long period of time can lead to skeletal fluorosis, where bones become more dense and brittle.

Dr. Liana Nolan, the region’s medical officer of health, said health problems occur when fluoride is present in high concentrations, which only occurs in naturally fluoridated water supplies.

“Water fluoridation that’s done intentionally is specifically added in the 0.5 to 0.8 parts per million range. That level of fluoridation is sufficient to reduce cavities, but it’s not in the higher levels which can cause health problems.”

Fleming is skeptical of the dental community’s support of water fluoridation, and argues that fluoride isn’t necessary to decontaminate water the way chlorine is. He contends that the process adds trace amounts of arsenic, mercury and other contaminants, which violates the Safe Drinking Water Act.

“Fluoride is not a water treatment; fluoride is a water contaminant.”

In a 2008 report to the region’s administration and finance committee, staff explained that water in the region is routinely sampled for lead and arsenic. Levels in Waterloo are consistently well below the maximum allowable concentrations under the province’s drinking water quality standards.

Currently, about 30 per cent of the water flowing to Elmira is fluoridated, depending on how much is being used on a given day.

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