

Voters say no to fluoride, K-W merger talks

BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO REGION — Residents have voted narrowly to remove fluoride from tap water in Waterloo, St. Jacobs and Elmira. And enough of them have said no to defeat merger talks between Kitchener and Waterloo.

Monday's fluoride referendum was decided by the tightest margin. The anti-fluoride side won with 50.3 per cent, beating the pro-fluoride side by fewer than 200 votes out of more than 30,000 cast.

As for potential merger talks, they are considered dead after Kitchener residents heartily endorsed them two-to-one, but Waterloo residents heartily rejected them two-to-one.

Waterloo Mayor Brenda Halloran said her city will not enter into merger discussions, but will continue to discuss joint services with Kitchener that make sense.

"A no vote means no," Halloran said. "We will still of course be good neighbours, good friends."

Tricia Siemens, a Waterloo bookseller, agrees merger talks will not happen. She helped lead the failed call for a yes vote in both cities.

"It's disappointing, but we all have to respect the democratic process," Siemens said. "At this point, done is done."

She said the vote was only about launching talks, but she figures many people interpreted it as a vote on a potential merger.

The vote against fluoride was tighter than Robert Fleming expected. He helped lead the charge to remove a substance that has been added to Waterloo tap water since 1967, as a public health measure to prevent tooth decay.

"I'm glad that Waterloo will enjoy non-fluoridated water," he said. "Even though it (the vote) was tight, it's rewarding."

"We're disappointed," said Dr. Harry Hoediono, a Kitchener dentist who helped lead the pro-fluoridation forces. "We respect the citizens of Waterloo in their decision."

Most Ontario tap water is fluoridated. The practice is considered safe and effective by the public health department and by more than 90 medical and health organizations.

Hoediono, soon to be president of the Ontario Dental Association, expects tooth decay will now rise in Waterloo. Fluoride opponents dismiss the concern.

The fluoride vote is non-binding. Fleming said the public will now be looking to regional council to respect the referendum results as they have pledged, and remove fluoride.

Kitchener and Cambridge do not fluoridate their water. Waterloo residents twice endorsed fluoridation by referendum, in 1981 and 1982.

Fluoridation proponents argue the weight of credible science strongly shows that adding fluoride strengthens tooth enamel and limits cavities, with no known risks at recommended levels.

They point to a lower rate of tooth decay in Waterloo schoolchildren, compared to Kitchener and Cambridge.

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

Supporters of merger talks, including some prominent business leaders, argued the cities need to plan their future without needless rivalries, to compete for investment and talent on the world stage.

Critics countered that the cities can compete with each other and the world without a costly, unnecessary union.

They saw a merger plot in disguise, predicted discussions would be expensive and disruptive, complained that community identities would be threatened, and pointed to co-operation as the way forward.

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