

Mercury News editorial: San Jose should fluoridate its water

Mercury News Editorial

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San Francisco approved fluoridating its water in 1951. Pittsburgh, Pa., started a year later, and Chicago saw the light in 1956, based on evidence that fluoride dramatically reduces tooth decay. But a large portion of Silicon Valley, the technology capital of the world, still does not drink fluoridated water. San Jose holds the dubious distinction of being the largest city in the United States without complete fluoridation, and it shows in abysmal dental health, especially in low-income neighborhoods.

Fluoridating water is up to water suppliers. The Santa Clara Valley Water District Board can change course Tuesday when it votes on a proposal to provide fluoridated drinking water at its three treatment plants. These plants supply areas including the parts of San Jose not covered by the city's small municipal water system -- which already is fluoridated.

Unfortunately, the district's staff has added a phrase to the proposed policy to offer fluoridation "provided that external funding is obtained for the capital and operation and maintenance costs of the fluoridation systems." Health advocates see this as a giant loophole to allow the district to say yes in theory but not carry out the policy. The board should remove the proviso, pass the fluoridation policy and resolve to find the money as it sets priorities for spending and for future ballot measures.

Upfront capital costs are less than \$10 million, a fraction of the district's \$312.6

million budget. And the local Health Trust, a strong advocate of fluoridation, is committed to support raising money for it.

Polls have shown that nearly 90 percent of Santa Clara County residents support fluoridation, which

the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls one of the top 10 public health advances of the 20th century. It reduces tooth decay by 20 to 40 percent. That's a fact.

As a result, it saves a bundle in health care costs: Every \$1 invested in fluoridating drinking water saves \$38 in future health care costs, by avoiding cavities and costlier tooth decay problems. A study in the state of Washington found that dental problems are the No. 1 reason for uninsured patients visiting hospital emergency rooms, the costliest form of care.

Opponents of fluoridation, a vocal minority, will try to convince board members Tuesday that it is poisoning people. They'll probably cite the recent Department of Health and Human Services recommendation that the optimal fluoride level in water is 0.7 milligrams of fluoride per liter of water, replacing the previous range of 0.7 to 1.2 milligrams. This was not because of danger. The HHS, working with the Environmental Protection Agency, recognized that Americans have access to more sources of fluoride today than they did when the program began. They decided the 0.7 level is optimal, while reducing concerns about side effects.

The HHS still supports fluoridation. So does the American Dental Association, the American Medical Association and the California Department of Health.

The Santa Clara Water District needs to strike a blow for science and for children's health by fluoridating the water that flows through its treatment plants.

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