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Town keeps fluoride out of water

by Randi Bjornstad

SUTHERLIN - Keeping those pearly whites in good shape will remain the personal responsibility of Sutherlin residents, following Tuesday's trouncing of a measure asking voters whether fluoride should be added to the municipal water supply.

With a resounding "no" on Measure 10-24, Sutherlin voters remain among the vast majority of Oregon residents whose drinking water does not contain fluoride additives that raise the level of the decay-preventing element to the one part per million recommended by many public health officials.

Unofficial final returns showed the measure garnering a 32 percent "yes" response to a 68 percent "no," with 46 percent of registered voters casting ballots.

Shanna Murphy, a dental hygienist who spearheaded the pro-fluoride measure, said she doesn't plan to raise the issue again with Sutherlin voters.

"This issue had unquestioned support from the medical and dental communities; I believe voters were confused by old wives' tales and the misextrapolation of scientific evidence by nonexperts," Murphy said.

Although people commonly use iodized salt to prevent goiter, enriched flour to avoid rickets and chlorinated water to stave off diphtheria, "if the people of Sutherlin want the freedom of continued rampant (tooth decay), then they should have that freedom," she said.

Fluoride opponent Bill Brundige expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the measure, although he said he fears that the vote won't be the end of the discussion.

"I'm concerned that the city attorney recently has been making statements that this vote is considered advisory and is nonbinding on the City Council, even though the mayor has said the city will do what the voters decide," Brundige said.

"This sounds a little hocus-pocus to me. Today the majority of voters said 'no.' Now let's just watch the City Council."

Earlier in the campaign, Murphy said in her work as a dental hygienist, for every dozen children she sees, as many as four or five routinely have between five and 10 cavities on the smooth surfaces of their teeth, decay "that could have been prevented with fluoride," she said. "It's well documented that fluoride reduces tooth decay in children by 60 percent."

Brundige believes that people get plenty of fluoride in their diets, because many foods and

beverages come to places without adequate fluoride from fluoride-rich areas.

"We ingest much more fluoride than we know - or than we need," he said.

Only about 25 percent of Oregon residents use fluoridated water. Salem, which serves 155,000 residents, ranks as the largest fluoridated public water system in the state. In this area, Albany, Coos Bay-North Bend, Coquille, Corvallis, Florence, Newport and Philomath fluoridate their water supplies.

Pro-fluoride campaigns have occurred in Eugene several times - most recently in 1995 - but without success.

Oregon ranks in the bottom six states - with New Hampshire, New Jersey, Hawaii, Utah and Nevada - in the percentage of the population using fluoridated water. By contrast, all public water systems in Kentucky, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Washington, D.C., fluoridate their water.

U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher has called fluoridation of water "one of the 10 great public health achievements of the 20th century."