

Skagit Valley Herald, May 17, 2007
Editorial - Commissioners get it right on fluoridation

A majority of the Skagit County commissioners made the right call this week when they voted 2-1 to authorize fluoridation in much of the county's water.

Would that the vote was the end of the discussion, but it probably isn't. Operational issues remain, and the furor over fluoride won't quietly subside.

In the end it was, despite the complexity of the issue, a simple choice: Commissioners Don Munks and Ken Dalhstedt opted in favor of the proven benefits of fluoridation, particularly for healthy teeth in children, despite intense pressure from anti-fluoride forces.

It was a gutsy stand, considering that the politically easy way out would have been to reject fluoridation. That would have left the "anti" segment feeling vindicated, and the profluoride folks starting all over again. It also would have been a failure of responsibility to the overall health of Skagit County residents.

In supporting their action, the commissioners can legitimately point to the results of a nonbinding advisory election in which 52 percent of the voters approved fluoridation. Detractors claim, unconvincingly, that 52 percent isn't a meaningful majority. It is in a democracy. If the vote had gone the other way by the same percentage spread, fluoride opponents would be touting the results as a voter mandate to reject fluoridation.

In the wake of the commissioners' action, those who oppose fluoride aren't likely to let the issue go — and are likely to bring it up during the next commissioner election. Vowing to punish office holders for their votes is an age-old political tradition, but not always an enforceable threat. Single-issue zealots often discover that other voters have broader perspectives and shorter memories.

Commissioner Sharon Dillon, the dissenter, offered a plausible explanation for her vote, and the voters deserve to know her thinking. She said she wasn't 100 percent sure that fluoridation is the right thing to do. Dillon was being prudent on principle in her opposition to fluoridation rather than acting from an ideological platform. At the same time, knowing that the other two commissioners were likely to approve fluoridation gave her political cover for a no vote.

We don't expect a respite from or change in the political noise on fluoride. Arguments for and against it haven't changed much and aren't likely to, and neither side has changed many minds either. But the fundamental value of properly fluoridated water has yet to be disproved, and the cumulative results are not refutable. Fluoridated communities have better dental health. That is the outcome we can all hope for in Skagit County — sooner rather than later.

Editorials reflect the consensus opinion of the editorial board and are written by its members: Publisher L. Stedem Wood, Editor Don Nelson and City Editor Dick Clever. Signed columns reflect the authors' viewpoints.