

Flouride

Ashburton District councillors debated the fluoride issue at their meeting on Thursday, without once touching on whether or not fluoridated water supplies were a good thing.

Instead, the issue was how to get a true reading on public opinion.

Ideas tossed around were consultation through a special submission process, a telephone survey of 400 residents or a full referendum of people on all the district's water supplies except Methven.

The issue has come to the fore again because of a submission made to the council's community plan by Medical Officer of Health Daniel Williams asking for fluoride to be re-introduced to the Ashburton water supply.

\$10,000 was as a result put in the council's budget to consult with the community, a staff report recommending that a phone survey be conducted in August with a decision to be made in October regarding preparing a proposal to go to the public as part of the annual plan process in April/May next year.

CEO Brian Lester said the first part of the process was to see what support there was to reintroduce fluoride. The second part was the formal statutory consultation.

An alternative was to put forward a formal proposal for special consultation. The financial effects of that could be minor as the ministry was prepared to subsidise it to the level of 50 per cent.

It could still be submitted on through the annual plan process, he said.

There was general agreement that the proposed timetable was too tight, Cr Kelvin Holmes saying the council would not have a lot of involvement in terms of educating the public and six weeks may not be long enough for both sides to get their material out.

Mr Lester agreed, saying the councillors had heard Dr Williams's submission but the public had not. The process could be shortened by doing the phone survey at the same time as submissions were being sought.

Cr Robin Kilworth felt the consultation period should be as concise as possible.

There had already been one flurry of activity. If the process dragged on for a year or more there would be an opportunity for more. A random phone survey at the same time as consultation was her preferred option.

Mayor Bede O'Malley was concerned the issue could dominate

council business for the next 12 months.

“That is the last thing we want to happen,” he said.

He reminded councillors there had been no request for a change in Methven, where the supply is fluoridated, so Methven was not included in any consultation proposal.

Cr Darryl Nelson said it was up to both sides to educate the public before the consultation started so the council could then ask people what they wanted.

“They do the education, we go out and survey them afterwards.”

Cr Bev Tasker opted to go for a full referendum. People on the supplies should be able to vote for what they get, she said.

“I found it very difficult to make a decision last time.”

She was supported by Cr John Leadley who felt that a referendum was going to cost little more than a telephone survey but would give a more certain result.

Cr Peter Reveley was all in favour of a short, sharp consultation process, saying there should not be time to polarise opinion. It was up to the council to make a decision.

Cr Ken Lowe also favoured a referendum, saying if there was a phone poll those who lost out would say the result had been skewed.

Mr O’Malley was in favour of making a decision as soon as consultation results were known.

“It’s our responsibility. We’re elected to make decisions on behalf of the community. This issue is no different to any other we have to decide on.”

The council had to be careful consultation was not tailored to suit one side, he said.

Cr Darryl Nelson was also in favour of a quick decision.

“If there’s a submission process this place will be full and half will be for and half against. They’re going to tell us about fluoride when they should be out telling the public.”

However Cr Rod Beavan said if the community said it wanted a referendum that was what the council should do. It must remain a possibility that was what people would want, he said.

Mr O'Malley did not agree.

"If we bow to demands for a referendum we will have to do the same for other contentious issues."

The annual plan process would still give everyone the opportunity to carry on the debate.

The final decision was carry out a telephone survey of the larger water scheme areas and a postal survey of the smaller supplies from mid-September to mid-October. If sufficient support is shown a proposal will then be included in the 2007/2008 annual plan for public consultation.