

Towns will get to vote on keeping fluoride

COUNCIL

by Peter de Graaf

A binding referendum in Kaikohe and Kaitaia will decide whether fluoride will return to the Far North towns' water supplies.

From March 2007 to March 2009 the Far North District Council ran a two-year fluoridation trial, funded by the Ministry of Health. Kaikohe and Kaitaia were chosen because of their dire child tooth decay rates.

The previous council had agreed to the trial as long as the Northland District Health Board undertook a study of children's teeth and could show they had improved, and called for fresh consultation before fluoridation



Wayne Brown

and the trial's short duration — “proven oral health benefits to children” compared to towns where no fluoride was added.

Yesterday councillors had to decide how to consult the public before deciding whether to turn the fluoride back on.

continued. A Northland District Health Board report, presented to a council meeting last November, found — despite problems with the fluoridation equipment

A complicating factor is that in 2007 the previous council signed a 10-year agreement with the Health Ministry to operate the fluoridation units — or else repay much of the \$327,000 spent on setting up the scheme.

Mayor Wayne Brown asked former council chief executive Clive Manley, who was at the meeting in his new role with the Social Development Ministry, how that agreement had come about.

Mr Manley explained that at the time the ministry paid out a 50 per cent subsidy for fluoridation equipment. The council negotiated a 100 per cent subsidy and two years' operating costs — but had to sign up for 10 years in return.

But he said fluoridation could be stopped at no cost to the council if it was shown most ratepayers opposed it.

Mr Brown said there was confusion about what kind of result would satisfy the ministry. Would it be satisfied with the view of more than 50 per cent of respondents to a referendum, or would it have to be 50 per cent of “all people who live and breathe” in the district?

There was also much debate about whether the referendum should take in the whole district, the wider Kaitaia and Kaikohe areas, or just the town-supply areas.

Cr Ann Court argued it should take in wider area, because many people drank tank water at home

but town supply at work or school.

The ministry appeared to specify that ratepayers had to be consulted but community board member John Schollum pointed out that more than half the homes in Kaikohe were rented, so most ratepayers lived out of the district.

In the end councillors decided to send a referendum form to all households in the town supply areas of Kaitaia and Kaikohe by including it with a future water bill.

“The people who pay [for water] are the ones who should have the say,” Mr Brown said.

In a separate vote, councillors decided to make the referendum result binding.