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Fluoride, plastic bags and composting -- does the Portland City Council really know best?

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Brad Schmidt, The Oregonian

By



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Fluoride opponents, with thumbs down, and proponents, sitting in front, during the Portland City Council public testimony last week on Commissioner Randy Leonard's plan to fluoridate the area's drinking water.

Portland officials seem to think they know what's best for people.

In the past 16 months, the City Council has reached into everyday lives to **eliminate plastic bags** at Portland supermarkets and to **cut weekly trash pickups**. Wednesday, the council is set to **vote to add fluoride** to local drinking water, affecting not only Portlanders but tens of thousands of suburban residents, too.

In each instance, commissioners have said they're looking out for the collective good and are willing to take the heat, even when the decision outrages some voters. But how much governance is too much, especially when the new regulation affects what you put into your body?

"They need to do what's best for the people and not force things on them that they don't want," Marcia Leslie, a 64-year-old Southwest Portland opponent of fluoride, said Tuesday. "They seem to seek the easy we-can-tell-you-what-to-do way instead of working together to find a better solution."

Leslie's stance isn't unique. Trouble is, not everyone agrees on what they support or whether an alternative is acceptable.

"There's a constant tension in U.S. public opinion between individualism and the entire community," said **Mark Peterson**, a professor at the **UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs** who specializes in health and American politics.

Elected officials, particularly those at the city level, are willing to tackle small yet sometimes controversial topics "because, surprise, surprise, politicians actually believe they're good things to do," Peterson said.

Local government, it turns out, goes well beyond collecting taxes, paving roads, opening parks and providing police. The Multnomah County Board of Commissioners, for example, in 2009 required chain restaurants to list calories to raise awareness about healthy eating. Portland last year aimed to promote composting by switching to weekly pickups of food and yard waste but trash pickups only every other week. And the city tried to encourage people to adopt reusable shopping bags by banning plastic ones at large retailers.

In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg wants to prohibit super-size sodas for health reasons -- drawing not just hackles from residents but mockery from "The Daily Show." Host Jon Stewart lampooned the proposed ban, saying "it combines the **draconian government overreach people love** with the probable lack of results they expect."

Officials point to health or environmental benefits to justify their actions.

"It's not all just, 'I'm going to be your mom or your dad, and I'm going to tell you how to live even though you're a grown-up,'" said Peterson, noting that poorly thought-out policy leads to more skepticism. "There's a set of practical policy considerations behind it."

But for all the rationale in the world, sometimes citizens simply don't like to be told what to do or how to do it.

Bob Nagel, who owned a Portland janitorial supply business until recently, said city leaders are too willing to overstep.

Like most fluoride opponents, the 56-year-old is worried about the health effects and said the decision is "way out of their purview." He's not swayed by proponents, who point out that reputable organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention call fluoride safe and have named it one of the greatest health achievements of the 20th century.

As for the plastic-bag ban, Nagel called it "lunacy."

"Everybody wants to be green," he said. "I know that was their motive for that."

Edwin Hill, who at 80 is retired and lives in Southeast Portland, said officials should let citizens vote on topics such as fluoride, as they have four times from 1956 to 1980. The proposal, which already has secured majority support from the City Council, aims to put fluoride in the water by March 1, 2014.

On the other hand, Hill didn't mind when the City Council banned plastic bags because he has his own reusable ones. But he's still upset about the reduction in trash collections.

"You have the stinking food bucket, and it attracts bugs like crazy," said Hill, a retired engineering contractor. "Why not just leave things alone and not mess with it?"

Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard, who is leading the fluoride effort, told his staff last month to be prepared for a flood of complaints. Looking back, he said, he was unable to effectively convey to them the toll of reviewing

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thousands of calls and emails at City Hall.

Leonard, who is retiring at year's end, called the fluoride issue the most contentious he's dealt with in his 10 years as a city commissioner, even more than his decision to eliminate duct-tape seating reservations for the annual Grand Floral Parade.

Of course, Leonard doesn't think Portland is overreaching, considering that two-thirds of Americans already drink fluoridated water.

"I don't consider it as an example of a nanny state to do something that protects public health," he said Tuesday.

He said most Portlanders are too busy with work, kids and responsibilities to analyze tough issues and reach an informed decision.

And that, he argued, is what voters elected him and his colleagues to do.

"I think," he said, "this is the way it's supposed to be."

-- **Brad Schmidt** ; On **Twitter**

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