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Proceed with water fluoridation

New efforts to widen the use of water fluoridation under the state's Healthy People objectives remain controversial today, although with better justification than the conspiracy theories of half a century ago.

Lafayette's city-parish government should comply with the 2008 state law requiring water systems with more than 5,000 hookups to regulate the fluoride levels in drinking water supplies. The City-Parish Council recently approved a tight-fisted resolution to state lawmakers, asking them not to impose the \$530,000 cost for such a trifling purpose as public health.

The prize quote of the night was from City-Parish Council member William Theriot, who doesn't cozy up to this idea that government should take care of our health if we're not responsible for it.

But even the purest libertarian would concede public health is a legitimate government function.

Presumably he would avoid the cost of dealing with swine flu because each person should provide his or her own plastic bubble.

Fluoridation also is about health - the public's dental health. Fluoridation prevents cavities, and the benefits for permanent teeth begin even before children lose their baby teeth. The American Dental Association says fluoridation in general reduces tooth decay in children by 60 percent. Even where fluoridated toothpaste and mouthwash and fluoridation treatments by dentists are available, treated water reduces tooth decay by up to 40 percent in children and nearly 35 percent in adults.

Yet Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan Levine told the Louisiana Dental Association last year that only 40 percent of Louisiana's people live where water is fluoridated. The Healthy People objective for 2010 is 75 percent.

The arguments against fluoride begin with the fact that the chemical is often an industrial waste product and a potential poison, although much the same can be said about chlorine. Excessive fluoride can actually harm teeth through a condition called fluorosis. The risk, while largely unquantified, must be weighed against benefits that critics say is also unquantified, especially since declines in childhood tooth decay have been similar in British commonwealth nations, where water is fluoridated, and in western European nations, where fluoridated water is rare.

But two points get overlooked. One is that those nations tend to have better access to care generally through national health systems. And the 2008 Louisiana law requiring fluoridation actually doesn't - it requires the maintenance of safe and proper levels of fluoride, which can be harmful if naturally occurring levels are too high.

The best answer all around is to pay the money to ensure the proper tooth-healthy level of fluoride is in our water.