



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on May 29, 2013

Portland, Oregon, Votes Down Plan to Fluoridate its Water, Again

For the fourth time since the 1950s, voters in Portland, Oregon, a city known for its embrace of progressive values, last week [voted down a plan](#) passed by the city commission to fluoridate its water. A local paper tried to make sense of it all:



For people used to thinking of Portland as the earnestly quirky liberal oasis portrayed in *Portlandia* and the style pages of *The New York Times*, the idea that Oregon's largest city agrees with the conspiracy-minded John Birch Society about dosing citizens with fluoride may seem odd. But on Tuesday, for the fourth time since 1956, Portland voters rejected a plan to fluoridate the city's drinking water.

Last September the city commission voted unanimously to take the advice of numerous health officials that fluoridation would reduce cavities in children, especially those "vulnerable" because of lack of proper dental care. All the arguments for fluoridation were trotted out, along with testimonials from various officials and government agencies which have been promoting fluoridation for decades. The proponents were well-funded as well, raising some \$850,000 compared to the opponents' \$270,000. Nevertheless, when the final votes were tallied, the referendum failed, 61-39. Jeff Mapes of *The Oregonian* thought it was because the city's water was already so pure and clean that residents hated to put anything unnatural into it:

Portland's water has always indeed been sold as largely untreated and literally fresh from the Bull Run watershed, which is protected from logging. So when opponents dubbed themselves "Clean Water Portland" and complained of putting chemicals in the water, they had a more receptive audience.

Slate's Jeff Bumgart just knew it had to be something to do with the environment and not with the facts:

While there are surely conspiracy theorists and anti-government militants among the ranks of today's Clean Water Portland, the organization's spokespeople and supporters generally do not express the conservative rhetoric ... that defines fluoride opposition elsewhere. Such tactics would never work in this liberal city.

Instead, opponents rely on attachment to the environment and natural health care, as well as the current mistrust of pretty much all institutions.

The current "mistrust" of institutions, such as the city commission, is closer to the mark. From Fluoride Action Network (FAN), a national organization that has been promoting de-fluoridation for years, [came the rest of the story](#): The city commission voted for fluoridation [following a series of secret meetings](#)



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[last July and August](#) between the pro-flo group Upstream Public Health and each of the commission's members. When word leaked out about those secret meetings that went unrecorded in violation of the commission's own rules, Upstream was forced to register as a lobbying group, and it all went downhill from there. A grassroots effort sprang into existence, Clean Water Portland, and within thirty days it had gathered more than 40,000 signatures to put the matter to a public vote. Paul Connett, FAN's Executive Director said:

Those opposed did their homework, relying on recent findings from the National Research Council (NRC) and Harvard that raised serious questions about the safety of current fluoride exposures.

Additional studies reported in *The New American* (see [here](#) and [here](#)) confirmed not only the dangers noted by NRC and Harvard, but also that fluoridation may be a cause agent for osteosarcoma (a rare bone cancer) and may also negatively impact the intelligence of young children.

Water fluoridation was found initially to be effective in reducing cavities in young children in a study in 1945 where the entire city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was turned into a [gigantic laboratory experiment](#) under the direction of Henry Trendley Dean, who wanted to test his thesis using the city's populace as guinea pigs. After 11 years, the study showed a significant reduction in dental caries and the race was on. Today nearly 70 percent of American citizens enjoy the benefits (and the side effects) of water fluoridation.

Happily, word is getting out about those side effects, and Portland is only the latest city to reject the plan. A partial list of [cities around the world who do not fluoridate](#) includes Amsterdam, Barcelona, Basel, Berlin, Copenhagen, Florence, Frankfurt, Geneva, Glasgow, Helsinki, London, Montreal, Oslo, Paris, Rome, Stockholm, Tokyo, Vancouver, Venice, Vienna, and Zurich. And the number of American and Canadian cities rejecting or repealing fluoridation continues to grow as well. Since 2010, more than 30 communities have rejected fluoridation, including Calgary, Alberta; Albuquerque, New Mexico; [Fairbanks, Alaska; and Pinellas County, Florida](#).

Even *The New York Times* is surprised at the public shunning of the practice and can do no better than to blame it on the "conspiratorialists" at the John Birch Society, repeating the refrain from Portland:

For decades, the issue of fluoridated water remained on the fringes. The John Birch Society took up the cause, seeing fluoridation as a communist plot to poison the nation. References to Nazis using fluoride to pacify prisoners in concentration camps — a claim that was never proved — circulate even today. At least one person at the Pinellas County meeting made reference to both the Soviets and the Nazis.

For clarification regarding the *Times*' claim that the JBS viewed the push for fluoridation as a "communist plot," this author spoke to the president of the society, John McManus. He relayed the following story about a call he received a number of years ago from a reporter at *Newsweek* magazine, asking him about the society's position on fluoridation:

I quoted to her the remarks made by a Tufts University professor who at the time had offered the suggestion that birth control chemicals be put into the water in order to curb the nation's growing population. I said that the precedent had already been set, and settled, with the nation's willingness to go along with fluoridation.

The reporter, astonished, asked for a copy of the professor's remarks, which I happily provided. *Newsweek* never published the article.



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The John Birch Society has always taken the position expressed by Mary McNally and Jocelyn Downie, [writing in](#) the Journal of the Canadian Dental Association:

It might be argued that restricting choice about the public source of drinking water is morally wrong because it violates the principle of respect for the autonomy of individuals by taking away their freedom to choose not to consume fluoride.

It might also be argued that this violation of autonomy is indefensible given that the benefits of fluoride can be realized in other ways (i.e., those who wish to consume fluoride can rely on other sources such as supplements, fluoride mouth rinses and professionally applied fluorides).

At its website, the society [explains its position further](#):

While the JBS doesn't agree with water fluoridation because it is a form of government mass medication of citizens in violation of their individual right to choose which medicines they ingest, it was never opposed as a mind-control plot.

If citizens want to add fluoride to their diet or daily routine, there are plentiful opportunities for them to do so. It's a choice they should make, not their local government.

Furthermore, opposition to fluoridation was never a major action item of any JBS campaign.

The vote in Portland is comforting to those who have opposed treating the citizens as guinea pigs and patients in a giant lab experiment, where the water isn't being treated (like chlorination, for example) but the people are. What's even more comforting is that Portland, the liberal city on the Left Coast, is just one of many making the same decision.

Photo of downtown Portland, Oregon

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