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## Times editorials

# In Pinellas, a return to the center

Pinellas County voters re-established the county's reputation for sensible, centrist government by replacing two commissioners who voted to stop adding fluoride to the drinking water. It is a victory for facts over lies, science over fear and the common good over narrow political agendas. It also is a reminder to public officials that the loudest, most extreme voices rarely reflect the sensibilities of the broader community they were elected to represent.

Republican commissioners Nancy Bostock and Neil Brickfield paid the price Tuesday for listening to the tea party crowd and discounting the established science that fluoridated water is a safe, effective way to substantially reduce tooth decay. They refused to accept that fluoride is embraced by dentists, the Florida Department of Health, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other experts. The voters rejected their uninformed decisionmaking and elected Democrats Charlie Justice and Janet Long.

The former state legislators will take office Nov. 20, and they are expected to immediately move to resume adding fluoride into the drinking water for 700,000 residents. They will be joined by three incumbents who voted against stopping the fluoridation in January - Republicans Susan Latvala and Karen Seel, and Democrat Ken Welch. Republican John Morroni should switch his vote and join the new majority. Republican Norm Roche, who rode the tea party wave to office two years ago, remains a hopelessly lost cause. He still wants a voter referendum on fluoride, but the voters already have clearly spoken.

Fluoride is widely supported by the public, and it is not a particularly partisan issue. Both Long and Justice received Republican votes, and Long defeated Brickfield in parts of the county that are hardly Democratic strongholds. What the Fluoride Four failed to recognize is that the controversy is not a manufactured issue but represents something larger about the county's identity. It undermined Pinellas' reputation as a community that values science, education and high-tech jobs. The voters made those connections, and they chose centrist government over ideological extremism.

The impact of replacing two of the most conservative Republican commissioners with two more moderate Democrats stretches beyond fluoride. Brickfield and Bostock were no fans of mass transit, and now Pinellas can take a more progressive approach toward designing a forward-looking transit proposal that is financially viable and politically acceptable to voters. There also should be more clear-eyed discussion about dealing with the Tampa Bay Rays and their quest for a new stadium. The same will be true for other pressing Pinellas issues, from overhauling the emergency medical services to providing programs for the homeless.

But fluoride was the flash point. The Fluoride Four tarnished Pinellas County's reputation, and voters corrected that mistake Tuesday by kicking half of them out of office. Now fluoride will be restored to the drinking water - and government based on facts, consensus building and the collective good will be restored in the county courthouse.