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## Times editorials

# Science over scare tactics

It took nearly 14 months, an election and the clarion voice of Pinellas County voters to persuade county commissioners to correct a serious error in judgment. It will take until March to carry out the commission's order to resume adding fluoride to the drinking water. For 700,000 water customers, the benefits should last a lifetime.

Tuesday's 6-1 vote to add fluoride back into the drinking water caps a long public controversy that reaffirms the centrist judgment of Pinellas voters and their embrace of sound science and sensible government. New commissioners Charlie Justice and Janet Long decided to run for office in part because the commission voted 4-3 to stop adding fluoride in January. The Democrats defeated two Republican incumbents who fell for the scare tactics and the tea party political pressure, and they pledged to reverse the decision upon taking office. Long and Justice were joined by commission chairman John Morroni, who changed his vote, and the three commissioners who have been on the side of public health all along: Republicans Susan Latvala and Karen Seel, and Democrat Ken Welch. Only Republican commissioner Norm Roche still voted against the common good - and he will be on the ballot in 2014.

Tuesday's fluoride decision transcends partisan politics. It means Pinellas water customers will rejoin more than 200 million people nationwide who drink optimally fluoridated water. It means those customers will once again benefit from the most effective, cost-efficient method of reducing tooth decay even with the widespread use of fluoridated toothpaste. And it means less frustration

and expense for Pinellas families who have spent this year scrambling to make up for the commission's misinformed decision to stop adding fluoride to the drinking water.

For Sue Sasko, Tuesday's commission vote should save the \$120 a year her Palm Harbor family spends on fluoride tablets for their children. For Beth Palubin, it should save her Clearwater family more than \$72 a year on fluoridated bottled water for their young son. For Julie Opsahl of Clearwater, who waited hours this summer at the county health clinic for dental care for her two sons, it should mean no longer giving fluoride drops to her youngest child.

There were the predictable hysterical warnings from fluoride opponents about "forced mass medication," poisoning the population and government conspiracies. There were the misrepresentations of academic studies of the negative effect of fluoride in countries where the levels far exceed the recommended level in the United States. There were references to God's will, lead pipes in ancient Rome and Hitler's Germany.

Those sorts of scare tactics and political threats worked in 2011, but the voters demonstrated this month that they are more sensible and expect better from their elected officials. The new commission voted to resume adding fluoride into the drinking water at the revised level proposed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The majority of this commission believes in the science and in the facts," Welch said.

That change in direction is good news for the dental health of hundreds of thousands of Pinellas residents and for the future of the county.