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NEWS

Assemblyman is concerned about effects of chloramine

Ira Ruskin working on legislation to demand testing of disinfectant

By JASON GOLDMAN-HALL

When most people complain about tap water, it's about the taste or smell, but for some in Sunnyvale and around the Bay Area, the water appears far more hazardous.

Since March of 2004, a number of Sunnyvale residents and some who work or visit the city and use the water have complained about irritation and asthma-like symptoms after using tap water or inhaling steam in showers.

According to members of the Citizens Concerned About Chloramine, an increase in those cases corresponds with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission introducing chloramine--a combination of chlorine and ammonia--to the water supply as a disinfectant.

Now, two years later, Assemblyman Ira Ruskin--who represents District 21, which includes 13 cities from San Carlos to San Jose--is working on legislation to demand further testing of chloramine and a look at alternative disinfectants.

"As the former chair of the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency,

I've had a long-standing interest in water, and I was aware of the concerns about chloramine," Ruskin said.

After meeting with Concerned Citizens' leader Denise Johnson-Kula at a BAWSCA meeting, Ruskin had his staff look into the issue, and he decided to take action.

For Johnson-Kula and the hundreds of people with whom she shares information, the bill is what they've been hoping to bring about for two years. They have held public meetings up and down the Peninsula and send out countless information packets on the health risks of chloramine.

Ruskin hopes Assembly Bill 2402, when finished, will help bring some relief to the people who have been sharing their stories with him in the past two years.

"The anecdotal evidence continues to mount, and I think it's right to take a good look at the subject so we can see what's really going on," he said.

The SFPUC--which provides almost half of Sunnyvale's water--has routinely denied that its testing has found any significant hazard from chloramine.

According to a spokeswoman for the commission, chloramine is now used because it is less expensive and lasts longer in the water supply than the chlorine that was used previously.

But according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, chloramine irritates eyes and respiratory tracts and can cause asthmatic symptoms if inhaled. And the same resiliency that makes it a good long-term disinfectant also complicates the issue for sensitive people because it cannot be easily filtered out of water like chlorine.

To contact Citizens Concerned About Chloramine, call Denise Johnson-Kula at 650.328.0424 or visit www.chloramine.org. For other concerns about chloramine issues, contact the Santa Clara County Public Health Department at 408.423.0700.