

No Gym of Their Own, No Problem

By Scott Laird

It all started for me with an anonymous phone tip. The caller who left the message on my cell phone stated that she was the grandmother of one of the Vernonia Varsity Basketball players. The team didn't have a place to practice and had a game scheduled the next night. The players hadn't been able to travel to Scappoose this morning for practice as was the normal routine during flood recovery because of inclement weather, so the team had decided to meet that afternoon at the covered outdoor play area at Washington Grade School, and "...keep up with the game. These kids are dedicated," said the voice. "They don't have a gym of their own, and I thought it might be of interest."

Well, it was of interest, so I headed down to the play area. This was the middle of January remember, and it was one of those cold, wet, blustery January days. There they were: thirteen players and two coaches getting in some court time. The team was playing two games of three-on-three, winner stays on the court. I caught Coach Ted Aubin, a middle school Social Studies teacher, and the Varsity head coach, between games.

"This was assistant coach David Weller's idea," said Coach Aubin. "He said 'Let's get together today and just play.' It wasn't mandatory, but thirteen of our eighteen players showed up."



The team really seemed to be enjoying themselves. There were smiles all around, and the "oohs" and "aahs" when someone made an especially tough shot as well as the usual ribbing and trash talk that goes with street ball. The players seemed to especially enjoy the chance to play against their coaches who were on the court to even out the teams. Coach Aubin seemed especially proficient in trash talk.

I asked Coach Aubin how the season was going so far. "This is our best start since I've been coaching for five years," said Aubin. "We've won six and lost five, but are only one and three in league play. But four of the five games we lost were close."

I asked coach Aubin how the flood affected the team. "We've tried to maintain our focus, but it's been hard," he said. "There has been so much uncertainty; we just never know what's going to be happening from one minute to the next. We've had to travel so much, and the weather hasn't cooperated. We don't have a home gym and no home crowds. And the guys just aren't getting the rest they need."

"But we just wanted to get out here and have some fun today."

As I zipped up my jacket against the cold and wiped my runny nose, I thought that I couldn't agree more with the grandmother who tipped me off: "Those kids are dedicated."

City and Schools Hold Meetings to Begin Flood Recovery

By Scott Laird

On January 17, 2008 both the Vernonia School Board and the Vernonia City Government held meetings designed to begin the process of planning their recovery from the flooding of December 2007.

The School Board met at the Community Church and began with updates on the current situation for students. Superintendent Ken Cox outlined the proposed schedule for bringing students back to Vernonia to begin attending classes by the end of January in the modular units that have been set up on school property. He announced that the Middle School is to be reoccupied and requested authorization from the board to make any changes necessary to the proposed calendar at his discretion.

The meeting was then opened for public comment. Among the comments and ideas that were expressed was an overwhelming desire to relocate the schools to a safer location. It was also suggested that the schools stay in the city limits and that keeping the schools within walking distance to downtown would allow the community to retain its vibrant feel.

There appear to be three possible options to the school situation: repair and reoccupy, raise up the buildings above flood level, or build in a new location. The general feeling expressed was that no one wants to repair and reoccupy.

There was discussion about the feasibility of securing funding necessary for a project of this scope. County Commissioner Tony Hyde discussed the compelling case that Vernonia has at this time and mentioned the possibility of the federal supplemental budget, that may be passed in March, as one source of funding. Superintendent Cox stated the district had received preliminary estimates of around \$45 million dollars for three new buildings not including the purchase of property.

The majority of citizens who spoke were in favor of moving the schools to a new location. They stressed that the current buildings are inadequate – they want their children to be safe. The school buildings in turn would be available as an evacuation center in the case of a disaster emergency, and that this was an opportunity for this community to fix a problem and gain something of which we can be proud.

The same evening the Planning Commission and the City Council held a joint study session at the Scout Cabin. The Planning Commission and the Council are working together to draft an ordinance to be adopted

by the city that will act as a guide to the upcoming recovery and rebuilding in the community.

The meeting proved to be an opportunity for all council and commission members to develop a better understanding of the decisions facing the community. There were FEMA staff members on hand to answer questions and clarify policy.

The community received some good news when they heard that FEMA is expected to have new flood maps drawn and available by the end of January. This will allow property owners, who wish to raise structures, to begin construction much sooner than anticipated. The speed with which the new maps were created was termed unprecedented.

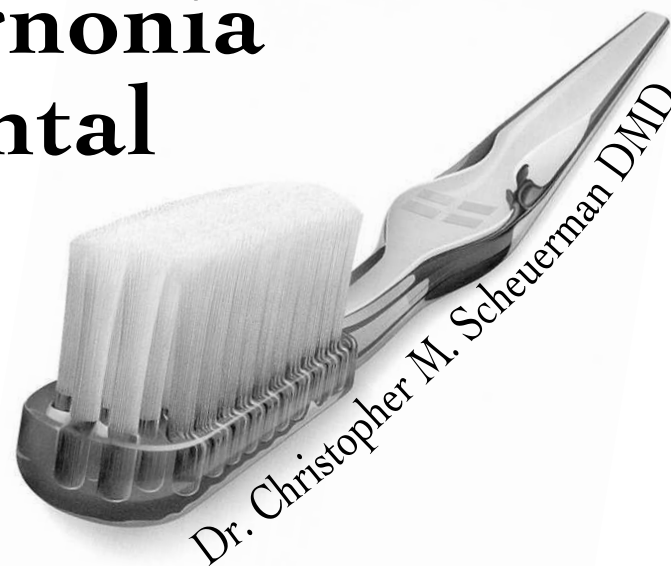
Because the City of Vernonia does have a Hazard Mitigation Plan already in place, it puts the community in a good position to receive funding assistance for mitigation to make things safer. These funds would be in addition to what individual citizens are receiving for personal damages and losses. FEMA will make available funding that is equal to 20% of the total spent on personal losses. This money is expected to total around \$20 million and will be distributed through a competitive grant program across all the eight counties affected by the December emergencies. County Commissioner Hyde recommended that Columbia County and Vernonia apply together. It is estimated that ninety-three percent of the losses in Columbia County occurred in the Vernonia region.

Another major point of discussion was the Substantial Damage determination on properties. If a property has been deemed damaged greater than fifty percent of the value of the structure, it is considered "substantially damaged." These properties may become eligible for additional funding but also have three options on how to deal with their issues: property own-

ers must lift the home, move the home, or destroy the home. FEMA representatives said flexibility has been built into this determination; this allows some property owners to receive a percentage finding that would be more advantageous to their situation. It was noted that because the city is responsible for meeting the requirements for bringing homes into compliance, the city is ultimately responsible for making the "substantially damaged" determination. The city is required to maintain compliance in order to remain part of the National Flood Insurance Program that allows property owners to purchase flood insurance at better rates. It was suggested that property owners who do not have flood insurance consider purchasing it at this time.

The Planning Commission and City Council will hold another Study Session on Monday February 4.. There will be a Public Hearing on February 7 at 5:00 p.m. before the Planning Commission Meeting at the Scout Cabin and a Public Hearing at 7:00 p.m. before a special City Council Meeting, also at the Scout Cabin. All three meetings are open to the public. The Study Session is not intended for public comment. Public comment will be taken at both Public Hearings.

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