

Vernonia Public Works – An Outstanding Effort

By Scott Laird

When I wrote about the Flood of 2007 for our January issue, I knew there were many people who had done exceptional work during and directly after the flooding. I also knew that I was sure to miss, unintentionally, many people who deserved recognition. So many people went above and beyond the call of duty during that very difficult time, and of course it was impossible to try and tell all the stories. This community was blessed by the response of so many of its citizens and by the caring shown from outside volunteers and organizations.

Many of us were aware of the city's inability to make fresh water during the first few days; the city came dangerously close to running out of fresh water at one point. But most of us don't know what went into getting not just our water system back to a normal operational level, but also the effort it took to get all the city Public Works systems and facilities back on line.

In meeting with Public Works Foreman Jeff Burch, the first thing I noticed was the dried mud on Jeff's office floor and the close proximity of the Public Works building to Rock Creek. I asked if the Public Works building had been flooded as well. "Yes, with a couple of inches of water," Burch told me. "Just one more thing we had to deal with."

"Those first few days were just chaos," said Burch. "I'm not really sure any of us could tell you what we were doing exactly. It's all a big blur."

I asked about the initial problems with the water system. "The worst part was not being able to make fresh water those first few days," said Burch. "I knew people were going to need to wash things off and hose out their houses. We were trying all kinds of tricks to get clean water out. We really didn't want to have to put use restrictions in place."

The crew was finally able to begin making clean water one week after the flood. "It was the whole crew that put in a great effort," said Burch. "A few of us wrote in twenty-four hours on our time cards for each of three different days. We literally worked straight through at times."

Scott Rethwill and Johnny Trent worked with Burch at the water plant which continued to need 24 hour-a-day monitoring even after it became operational. Jim Gido and Carl Pense stayed busy with clean up and other duties. "We could not have done this without an incredible effort by this entire crew," said Burch.

"We lost a lot of testing equipment," continued Burch. "We had to shut down our wastewater pumping stations because they flooded, and they had to be cleaned up and restarted. Our parks suffered some serious damage, especially Anderson and Airport parks. Our streets got pretty beat up with all the heavy equipment use. We still really have our hands full."

Burch also noted some additional help that arrived to assist almost immediately. "Hamer Electric from Longview and Dennis Nelson from Dennis Electric got out and started fixing issues with our wastewater pump stations and at Anderson Park right away. Landis and Landis who did our sidewalks here in the city called and asked how they could help. I gave them our city back hoe which we were too busy to operate, and they took it out with their dump truck and picked up debris with the inmate crews. And I can't say enough about the inmates and the State Fire Marshal Team. I don't know where we would have been without those groups. We received help from so many outside sources."

Through all of this Burch has kept a good attitude and his sense of humor. "We all spent a lot of time away from our families. We all got a little cranky after a while," said Burch, laughing.

Knowing Burch's home on North Street also flooded, I asked Jeff how he and his family were faring. "We're still living in a trailer out at my parents. We were lucky. Derek Handegaard from Absolute Marble and Granite showed up while our street was flooding, and I was dealing with public works issues. He loaded up most of our furniture and got it out of the house. It made a huge difference."

The citizens of Vernonia have a lot to be thankful for in the wake of this catastrophic event, not the least of which is that we have such a dedicated crew in our Public Works Department.



Pictured from left to right: Scott Rethwill, Carl Pense, Jeff Burch, and Jim Gido. (Not pictured: John Trent.)

Columbia County Flood Relief

By Scott Laird

The Columbia County Flood Relief Team is settling into its job and finding its niche in the big picture of flood recovery. Now based out of the Vernonia Community Learning Center after initially setting up at Vernonia City Hall, the team is taking its job as the information clearing house and victims assistance coordinators very seriously. "We're happy with the way things have come together," said Jim Tierney who has been a key figure in organizing the victims' relief effort almost from Day One.

"We have had 650 people register with our office here," said Tierney. "FEMA has had 728 claims in Columbia County. That is a lot of affected people in our communities."

Tierney was involved in flood recovery during the '96 flood and found himself involved again in 2007 because of his experience and knowledge. He explained the role of the team as the county moves into its second month of recovery. "We are here to help people through the transition from victims of a disaster all the way through to finishing repairs and getting back into their homes," said Tierney. "Our goal is to make the process of securing resources more orderly and get as much relevant information into the hands of the people that need it."

"We have quickly become the repository of collective knowledge, the central clearing house for information," Tierney added.

Tierney says they are finding that about twenty-five to thirty percent of those affected by the flood were covered by insurance. And there is a ninety-six to ninety-eight percent overlap from '96 of those that were flooded a second time.

Because Vernonia was the most severely affected community and received the most widespread damage, the organized relief effort centered here almost by default. "There has been some confusion about why what has turned into a county agency is being run out of Vernonia instead of St. Helens. But this is where the majority of the people who need assistance are located, so it just made sense," said Tierney.

The team initially found itself as the first face that flood victims saw when they came looking for help or with questions about what they should do. The team was able to put in place the information collection data bank model that was used during the '96 recovery and use that to identify the immediate needs of victims. Before FEMA arrived, the flood relief team was gathering data about damage, needs, and resources. They managed the donations that arrived including the food, cleaning supplies, clothing, furniture, and building materials that almost immediately began pouring into the community. "The complexity and logistics of managing all those resources was incredible."

"I can't say enough about the hard work that the volunteers have put in here," said Tierney about the Flood Relief Team. "The people on the front lines have worked an unbelievable volume of hours, and many of them have been here for the duration. We have had about twenty regular people here working anywhere from eight to sixteen hour days, sometimes seven days a week. There has just been phenomenal generosity shown by these folks who are here quietly helping their neighbors, helping people individually through the recovery process. And we have had some very dedicated volunteers who have driven in from out of town day after day and brought great talent to our effort."

"We are now transitioning to projects," said Tierney. "Our initial objective was to meet people's immediate needs: shelter, food, clothing, and clean up. We have been doing a lot of case management one on one with people. Now we are moving into the rebuilding phase. And we are finding that there continues to be a need to manage each person's situation pretty closely. We are helping people try to maximize their benefits as they negotiate their way through the steps: from private insurance, to Small Business Association (SBA) Loans, to FEMA grants, and then to other mitigation funds that are being identified. It's sort of a trickle down effect. We help people find resources they are eligible for at each level."

Tierney works for Community Action Team (CAT) as Deputy Director and has worked there since 1984. He manages CAT's Community Investment Department, working to create housing and community facilities, employment, and economic opportunities that enhance and sustain communities. "I have been working for years to build awareness of the need for 'capacity building' at the community level. In the case of CAT, that capacity means the right skills added to a little extra time and a little extra money. Armed with this capacity, individuals and community organizations can step up to meet the specific challenges facing their communities in ways that no amount of good will can adequately equip external organizations to help. Our ability to respond to the last two Vernonia floods is 'Exhibit A' for the utility of such community capacity."

The expectation is that there will be between \$10 and \$20 million dollars of FEMA funds available for mitigation in addition to the damage repair funds currently being distributed. The availability of these funds is expected to be very competitive among the eight counties affected by winter damages in Oregon in December. Columbia County was the most severely damaged, so the expectation is that a significant portion of the funds will be funneled here. These funds can be used to take steps to keep damages from happening again. "My hope is to secure a significant portion of these funds to help people raise their homes so they don't get flooded again," said Tierney. "But that is just one option that is being considered."

"We want the best possible outcomes for as many people as possible," concluded Tierney. "We are finding that we can help people negotiate with their insurance company, with FEMA and with contractors. We are helping match donations with those in need. We are identifying construction help and labor for those that need assistance. We can be a great resource for people who just need someone to talk through their ideas and vent their frustrations. We just might be able to help them find a solution."