

# Flooding and the Nehalem Watershed - What Happened and What Can We Do?

By Scott Laird

Now that our community has experienced our second 500 year flood in only twelve seasons, we as a community need to start asking some difficult questions. Not only do we need to ask questions, we need to find some creative solutions.

One person who is already asking those questions and proposing possible solutions is the Director of the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC), Maggie Peyton. Peyton has worked for UNWC for twelve years and is probably one of the most knowledgeable people about the rivers and streams in our region. She spends her days studying and monitoring the Nehalem watershed and has a deep understanding of how it is affected seasonally, yearly and historically.

"150 years ago, based on research, historical documents, and local lore, before settlers arrived here, the Nehalem Valley and the surrounding coast range was blanketed by an intact old growth forest ecosystem," said Peyton during a recent conversation about six weeks after the flooding. The old growth forests acted as a sponge that held water longer, slowing the rise of and buffering the river during heavy rain and rain on snow events. Over the millennia the Nehalem Valley flood plain formed and reformed in a meandering pattern switching over time from one side of the valley floor to the other.

In the mid 1800's the pioneers arrived on the scene, and over time the homesteads gave way to farms and towns, and transportation routes and logging activities increased as did the human impact to the natural floodplain. "The indigenous people that had been in this valley for 9,000 years did not have the obvious effect that the settlers have had."

In order to truly understand the nature of the situation we now find ourselves in, Peyton is calling for using as many professional specialists as possible to study and help develop short and long term solutions to decrease the impact high water events have on our communities. There appear to be many issues that are contributing to the changes that are occurring in the Nehalem Valley Watershed. "We need to be willing to be proactive, not reactive to this problem," said Peyton. "We all need to be educated about river system dynamics. We know that the ever changing weather patterns and rain on snow events are factors that are going to happen. And we have certain geology and geography that lends itself to these types of flooding events. What we can do is try to interact intelligently with the Nehalem flood plain."

"We should bring in planners, surveyors, and GIS mapping specialists and create computer models and study how fill is affecting flooding," suggested Peyton. "We need the expertise that hydrologist engineers and landscape designers can give us. We need specialists like Fluvial Geomorphologists."

This last job title stumped me, so I looked it up on line. Geomorphology is the study of landforms and what shapes them. Geomorphologists seek to understand why landscapes look the way they do and learn about land form history and dynamics. They try to predict future changes through field observation and physical experiments. Fluvial Geomorphology concerns the flow of rivers and sediments through landscapes. All this information could be very helpful in discussing our situation.

"We need to consider how the watershed is managed as a whole in our region," said Peyton. "I have been concerned about the scale and type of logging practices for a long time and have been especially concerned by the changes that have occurred in surrounding forested uplands since the 1996 flood. My opinions are not always popular in this community, but I think as a community we should be concerned about the systematic logging of the headwaters, steep slopes, and about the expanse of forest roads, road drains and clear cuts." One idea the council wants to pursue is called 'Natural Valley Storage.' The idea is to work in cooperation with all concerned to improve the watershed's ability to catch, hold and release rain and snow melt at each gradient change from the headwaters to the valley floors and on down to the Nehalem estuary. Forests need to be allowed to grow longer, allowing them to hold more water during their life span.

Peyton echoed other community leaders in their concerns about the location of the sewer lagoons and other man made obstacles to river flow. "The sewer lagoons need to be moved. We need to identify all the bottlenecks in the Rock Creek and Nehalem floodplain especially in Vernonia at the confluence of these two great rivers. The old millpond acts as a huge dam. It is a plug. A big part of our problem is the bottlenecks."

Peyton offered a number of options when it comes to dealing with development in the floodplain. "Ideally we should be moving people out of harm's way," said Peyton. "We should be providing incentives to encourage people to move up out of the flood plain. We need to expand Vernonia's urban growth boundary so there are places that can be developed out of harm's way. And we need to evaluate places that we have filled in. The fill is suspect."

"We should also bring in architects to design houses, schools, and buildings that can be raised but without solid foundations, like on stilts or with flow through foundations. The water needs to be able to flow freely. We should be creating and enhancing more wetlands, places that can absorb and hold excess water. We should try to channel the water out of places like the "tree streets" where it just sits during high water events. We should move vital services, like communication, food, fuel, medical, waste disposal, our children, seniors, and low income families out of the flood plain."

Peyton added this final concern. "People should be encouraged, even mandated, against storing toxic chemicals and personal items in areas that can flood. The clean up that this event required was enormous. The amount of material that ended up in the landfill was incredible, and there could have been much more salvage done. Clean up downstream needs to be part of the Vernonia Disaster Plan. For me, contamination and waste in the flood plain is a big issue."

The Nehalem River has so far sustained human life in this valley for approximately 9000 years. How we decide to manage our impact will influence if we are able to continue to enjoy country living in this beautiful river valley and recover our individual and collective peace of mind.

# Senior Center Weighs Options, Plans to Reopen at Same Site

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia Senior Center will be reopening sometime in February at the same location that was flooded according to both Treasurer George Gans and Senior Case Manager/Advocate Karen Miller.

"In order to be able to provide the required services, we are working to recondition the old building and make it usable again," said George Gans. "We need to be able to provide meals for those seniors that are most needy."

Community Action Team's Karen Miller agreed that getting the kitchen back up and running was the first priority. "Larry Bernardi and I went in that first day after the flood," said Miller. "It looked like a blender had gone through there. We lost everything. We even had a big heavy industrial freezer that was turned over."

Miller, whose office was a complete loss, hopes to move back into the center by February 1st. She has been working out of the Holce Logging office since the flood. "Randy Holce has been wonderful," said Miller. "He said he was thinking about a way he could help the community when I walked up looking for a place to set up a temporary office. It's worked out great."

Miller has actually been out on the road a lot. "I have spent most of my time visiting with seniors," explained Miller. "It's been hard to see so many people who don't have many options or places to go. Some are having a hard time dealing with this. I am out there trying to find them the help they need. I am working to help relocate people or connect them to services."

The future of the Senior Center remains a question. At a meeting in January the group voted not to relocate to a site that had been proposed near Vernonia Lake. "We are still looking at several possibilities," said Treasurer Gans.

*Karen Miller is available to help anyone, especially seniors, with placement help or other flood related issues. Karen can be reached at 503-429-9112.*

# Another Place to Get Relief Supplies

Disaster Relief supplies are available at the home of Don and Nona Skinner, 58401 Pebble Creek Road in Vernonia. The Skinners received two twenty foot storage containers delivered to their home through their affiliation with the Church of Christ. The containers contain nonperishable food boxes with meals for a family for four days. They also have cleaning supplies and water. "We have a lot of items here, and we're not sure people know it's available," said Nona. "If people can't come get it, and they let us know, we will try to get supplies to them."

Nona reiterated that this relief effort is nondenominational and is available to anyone who needs help. The Skinner's home is located about a mile and a half past the bridge on Pebble Creek. Look for the banner at the end of the driveway that says "Church of Christ Disaster Relief." The Skinners can be reached at 503-429-8401.

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