

Ordinance 711

By Evangeline Doyle

The City Planning Commission has been working on Ordinance 711 for over seven months, consolidating, investigating and discussing design and development standards for the City of Vernonia. What prompted the effort? Several things. Foremost was the number of ordinances (six at my last count) that had building code requirements in them. The sheer quantity of ordinances resulted in confusion from a public information standpoint. Omission by building inspectors ensued allowing for homes to be built that did not meet the standards, and conversely, financial surprises for homeowners when inspectors found codes that had not been met nor identified earlier in the building process as a requirement. Two members of the Planning Commission had been adversely impacted financially by this very confusion years before when they were placing and/or remodeling their homes; each time a new inspector arrived they identified another code (in another ordinance) that had to be met.

The other reason for the timing of this effort is due to complaints that began coming in late Spring of 2007. Complaints from residents that stick-built homes were being built in violation of Vernonia codes for building standards; the homes became known as "the boxes," they were made even more obvious by their placement in neighborhoods comprised mostly of 1920's-era mill houses.

Ordinance 711 has now consolidated all development standards and requirements into one document. Two new elements were added, an increase to the required roof pitch and a front entrance facing the street with a required fifty square feet of covered entrance or porch. The six existing street-facing design elements did not change, but they did remove the requirement to have four design elements on the sides and rear of the property. The ordinance makes design standards for single family dwelling the same for all – whether you have a manufactured home or stick built home.

In the public hearing held February 19 to review Ordinance 711, there was a perception by some residents that the Planning Commission was attempting to rush something through the system, and a perception that these new design standards would come at great expense and difficulty to recent flood victims.

After much public discussion, the Planning Commission took into account the additional expense for roof pitch from 3:12 to the proposed 6:12 pitch (as planned in ordinance 711), and compromised to a roof pitch requirement of 4:12.

Another bit of confusion during the hearing was in the number of things that were not changing; existing design/development standards that were currently on record came as a surprise to some, even City Council members.

The Planning Commission said it is not their intention for these changes to be an additional burden for flood victims, on the contrary – they feel the timing could not be better. Design standards and codes have now been simplified and assembled into one ordinance [711] vs. six, making it easier for residents to attain information and get started on their rebuilding process. The other reason that timing is good for Vernonia as a whole, is that there will be a lot of building, rebuilding, and/or siting of new homes. It is the Planning Commission's job to ensure as a city that we develop intelligently and protect our tax base. This is not a time for "anything goes."

The Planning Commission has also changed the timing of their meetings, moving from meeting on the first and third Thursdays, to every Thursday. Moving to weekly meetings will expedite the process.

In the Council Meeting that followed the public hearing, there was no public opposition for Ordinance 711. The ordinance passed with some minor wording adjustments requested by City Council.

Mist and Birkenfeld (continued)

Busch discussed the difficulty her crews faced during the event. She was personally stuck out of town and was unavailable during the disaster. "We have a long strung out district. Half is in Clatsop County, half in Columbia County. We ended up with seven isolated areas that were cut off from each other during the flooding. We are about twelve hours downstream from Vernonia, so our flooding took place Monday during the night and Tuesday morning which made it more challenging."

I spoke with Division Chief Ann Berg who was in charge during the flood. "Both my chief and assistant chief got cut off, so I was it," said Berg.

Berg talked about being so isolated and knowing trouble was coming. "I knew by Monday morning we were going to be in trouble. But the roads were already starting to flood and wash out. There really wasn't any way out. We lost outside phone contact and couldn't get information about road closures outside our immediate area." Berg had her volunteers doing local road checks all day Monday.

Knowing they were trapped, Berg established a disaster shelter and began evacuations as it became dark on Monday night. "It was a quiet night," said Berg. "And when we found out that the waters had finally crested in Vernonia, we told people to prepare for high water as best they could."

As the Nehalem River flooded its banks, it divid-

ed the communities into small islands, leaving many people trapped in their homes. Volunteers continued to do home checks where they could. "Communication was key, and we had to do that door to door, home by home. Fortunately we had key volunteers in every area who pitched right in."

Another concern was the situation at Fishhawk Lake, an isolated community of about 130 homes outside Birkenfeld. I spoke with Bob Yoder who acts as Director of Buildings and Grounds and oversees the local wastewater treatment and roads. Yoder has been at Fishhawk Lake since 1979 and said he has never seen anything like this flood. "It's all such a blur," said Yoder. "I've been here all those years and seen a lot of bad storms, but I never expected this to happen. We had water about two feet higher than in '96."

Yoder went on to explain what went on that day. "Three of the four streams that feed the lake flooded. We had a mudslide that blocked Lakeview Drive, isolating fifteen homes. A culvert washed out on the North Shore which left another thirty homes cut off. All our docks and paddle boats and a bunch of picnic tables washed down through the dam outlet. Almost 100 houses had some water damage from flooding."

Yoder explained that a power boat was used on the lake, normally reserved for electric motors only, to rescue stranded families. "We had to find them

places to stay. We had no power, no electricity and no cell phone service. We finally found a spot down the road where we could get a cell signal, and then we sent someone down there to get messages out for people to let their families know they were alright."

Yoder said that the lake dam held up fine even though the water almost went over the top. He also expressed thanks to Kevin Wurst of the Clatsop County Roads Department for his help in getting equipment in to help with cleanup. "Kevin went beyond the call of duty for us," said Yoder.

Tuesday morning Northwest Natural Gas unlocked the gate to the Columbia River Mainline Road, allowing access out of the area. At 12:30 p.m. the water crested at Banzer Rd west of Mist. "That meant we still had six more hours of rising water through the rest of our district," said Ann Berg. "Our volunteers continued to do welfare checks, but we really didn't have to do too many rescues."

Both Division Chief Berg and Assistant Chief Bush commended their volunteers for their great effort.

"The Volunteers were the foundation of our effort," said Berg. "There was no grandstanding. They knew we had a job and just wanted to know how they could help."

Inmates Honored

On January 31, over 200 state prison inmates from four correctional facilities attended a luncheon in their honor. The lunch was as a thank you for helping Vernonia clean up after the flood of 2007. The inmates were served lunch by Departments of Corrections staff and received praise from Governor Ted Kulongoski and a contingent of Vernonia representatives. About 500 people attended the luncheon, including many of the inmate's families. During the month of December, 254 inmates took part in the clean up effort in Vernonia, and continue to be recognized by residents for their hard work, great attitude, and the tremendous difference they made in the community.



Governor Kulongoski speaks to inmates at a January luncheon.