

First Response – How Can Vernonia Be Better Prepared?

By Scott Laird

In the wake of the Flood of 2007 there is was a feeling that Vernonia First Responders handled the situation as well as could be expected. Vernonia citizens were proud of the effort of the many volunteers who stepped forward and gave their time and energy to help fellow members of the community. But now as reality sets in and we are trying to recover from our second 500 year flood in twelve years, we need to recognize that the type of flooding we experienced may become a more common occurrence than expected. Taking time to reflect on our situation here in the Nehalem River Valley and our preparation level makes sense.

Community leaders are investigating ways to mitigate damage from flooding to local properties and are considering many options of how to better control high water when such an unusual congruence of events happens. These are large, long term projects that won't have immediate impacts on our situation. Other community leaders are concerned with our ability to be better prepared, to respond quickly and be better informed as a community if another similar event were to happen in the near future.

I spoke with Vernonia Police Chief Mathew Workman about issues he has identified that could be improved. He addressed a number of concerns. "First of all is communication, not just between our First Responders but also with our citizens. We need to consider a mechanism that can allow us to pass along information real-time so our citizens know what is happening as quickly as possible. We need to consider an early warning system and other systems for notifying the public. And we need to incorporate the tools we have like flow meters on the river that can give us vital information."

Chief Workman also mentioned the need for proper equipment. "We need to have equipment in the right locations. We also want to look at our equipment needs and be fiscally responsible. Do we need boats here, and do we spend money on water rescue training that we only use every ten years?"

Chief Workman also discussed limited resources in a small rural community. "Some of my officers live in the flood zone themselves. I need to consider building stronger partnerships with other agencies and look to bring them in sooner to assist us. And we also need to look at what was a disconnect with agencies above us, the ones that could have provided resources right away."

I also spoke with Vernonia Fire Chief Paul Epler who echoed many of Chief Workman's concerns about communication, equipment and training. Epler suggested using emergency vehicles to cruise the neighborhoods block by block with sirens on to alert citizens. He also suggested an automated phone system to call all numbers in the area. "We need to find a way to be in touch with the citizens," said Epler. "We need a better,

more informed public information system that can help get information out, not just to our community but to the outside as well." He also discussed the need to reconnect a warning siren at the fire station which has not been done yet due to a lack of funds.

Epler suggested high level Incident Command training for city officials so they would be better prepared to assume leadership in the event of a disaster and the need for a backup command facility at the other end of town from the Fire Station near City Hall. "Rock Creek cuts the town in half during a flood, and we need to have a backup plan. I think we may need to consider a satellite communication system because when the phone system goes down, we have nothing," said Epler.

One step to improve community first response is already taking place. Vernonia Police Sergeant Mike Kay has put together two Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) trainings. The first class has already started and has thirty-one participants; a second class is being formed and has fourteen people signed up. CERT members receive basic response training and are prepared to assist family and residents in their neighborhoods first, then the general community in the event of a disaster.

Personal preparation is another tool that every citizen should consider that can help in emergencies. It is recommended that all families have a disaster plan in place for themselves. According to FEMA, things to consider when developing a personal emergency plan are: what kinds of disasters besides flooding might we be susceptible to; what do your school and your workplace have in place for an emergency plan; evacuation and escape routes; how your family will communicate, utility shut-off and safety, insurance and other vital records storage, care for pets and animals; and basic safety skills like first aid and use of a fire extinguisher. FEMA recommends the following two websites which offer detailed information on personal preparation in an emergency: www.fema.gov/areyouready and www.floodsmart.gov.

Anyone with a home computer can help themselves be better informed about current and predicted conditions. On February 21, representatives from the US Geological Survey and the National Weather Service were in Vernonia to discuss how residents can access real-time information from stream flow gauges on the Nehalem River and current weather information. For stream gauge information go to <http://or.water.usgs.gov> then click in the left-hand channel on "Real-Time Data", "Stream Flow." You can then look at any river that has a gauge including the Nehalem River near Vernonia under Coastal Basins. For weather information go to www.weather.gov/portland where you access all kinds of information including additional river gauge information by clicking on AKPS in the left-hand channel, and then clicking "Vernonia" on the map. You can also check snowpack conditions at www.or.nrcs.usda.gov/snow.

Worship Team Being Organized

Vernonia resident Mark Brown is working to form a local contemporary style worship team, a Christian musical performance group. The team will be open to anyone interested and to start will meet at the Vernonia Community Church on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. Further details are still being worked out.

"We used to have one a couple of years back, and I hope to build another one with whoever has a desire to see it happen again," said Brown. "I hope it will spark the interest of other people who currently play in local church teams. Maybe it can be a bridge builder or a piece of common ground between churches."

Participants are being asked to bring their instruments, their voices but most of all their hearts to worship.

"The team we had before actually played at many of the local churches during their regular worship service," explained Brown. "It is always interesting to see God at work in people's lives, and we saw many blessings as a result of the last team. I hope to see many more."

Brown is presently testing the waters to see if the interest is here at this time to participate in this activity. Please contact Mark Brown for more information: mrbrown@hotmail.com or call and leave a voicemail at (503) 961-5281.

Vernonia Lions Provide RV's as Housing



The Vernonia Lions Club in partnership with International Lions Club in the Portland metro area is working to acquire travel trailers and motor homes in an effort to provide emergency temporary housing for displaced Vernonia residents.

With over sixty families in need of housing and a limited number of FEMA provided manufactured homes still being arranged, there is a need for additional temporary units. The Lions Club has put out an appeal to the general public for donations of used recreational vehicles that are in good condition. The Lions are also accepting cash donations to help with the effort. The first

donation, a motor home, arrived in Vernonia on February 20.

The donated vehicles will be placed on families' properties while repairs on their homes are completed.

Donations can be made to the Oregon Lions Sight & Hearing Foundation - Vernonia Flood Victims Relief. Donations are tax deductible.

For more information or to donate a used travel trailer or cash, please contact Lions member Sharon Elder:

Phone: (971) 570-8956

- or -

Email: sharon.access@comcast.net

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