

Vernonia Residents Are Coming Home

By Scott Laird

At a March 10 ceremony FEMA representatives, local dignitaries, and state emergency management officers thanked property owners Gordon Smith and Chuck Hendryx for their cooperation and consideration in leasing their property to FEMA. Smith and Hendryx were instrumental in helping get the site ready to accept the manufactured homes and in getting residents into them.

Glen Sachtleben, a FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer, congratulated the Vernonia community and its residents for a job well done throughout the disaster and recovery.



ery. "When the people here get knocked down, they want to get back up," said Sachtleben. "There is a belief and a feeling here that we see. When we come up here it gives us a shot in the arm, helps us get motivated to do our jobs."

Among those in attendance were Vernonia Mayor Sally Harrison, County Commissioner Tony Hyde and State Senator Betsy Johnson.

The property can accommodate twenty-one units and was revamped by Dow Brothers Construction who also received praise for their timely efforts. The site was cleared and leveled, and water, sewer and electric utilities were installed all in a matter of about ten working days.

Smith and Hendryx were each presented with a framed plaque by FEMA Representative Sachtleben that contained a letter of thanks and photos of the site under construction. "This is a big event for Vernonia," said Smith. "We're glad we could help get housing for these people who have been displaced."



The FEMA homes began arriving at the site on Monday March 17 and continued to arrive throughout the week. A total of thirteen units were set to arrive. There is a possibility thirteen more will be made available. "We have requests for more than the twenty-one homes the site can hold," said Christine May of FEMA Public Affairs. "The number of homes needed keeps changing every day as other local options become available."

Workers were working to connect utilities, install stairways for the front and back entrances, and unpack the furniture that comes with the homes, getting them ready for residents to move in at the end of March.

School District Considers Options

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia School District will be making some big decisions over the next few months. With all three school buildings still sitting in the flood zone after being damaged during the flood of 2007, deciding whether to move the school campus or to rebuild on the same site is the first main decision in what has become a very complicated equation.

Superintendent Dr. Ken Cox and School Board President Kim Wallace have both publicly expressed their desire to see the school campus relocated to higher ground. So have a number of local residents. It is not hard to see why moving the schools might be preferable to repairing the old buildings. Among the many benefits:

- New facilities out of the flood zone would provide a place that is safe for community children to attend classes
- The huge expense involved just to repair VHS (estimated at nearly \$1,000,000) would still leave the community with an aging facility that seems to be in constant need of repairs
- Health and air quality concerns at WGS because of previous flooding
- Space has become an issue at WGS since they are not able to use the basement anymore for anything but storage because of safety concerns
- Major concerns and questions about the ability of the district to receive adequate insurance coverage for facilities that remain in the flood zone.

"It is critical that we find a place where students and staff can have some sense of security when they are at school and do not worry whenever it rains," commented Dr. Cox.

Currently WGS is being used by the elementary students except for the downstairs basement level portion of the building. The Vernonia Middle School, which was built

in 2005, has been repaired and is currently being used as classroom space for high school students and the district cafeteria. The high school building is unoccupied and is sitting, waiting for decisions to be made about its future. High school students are attending classes in modular units that have been set up on the campus and are serving as temporary classrooms.

One immediate concern that needs to be addressed is the lack of an adequate high school gymnasium facility, not only for high school sporting events but also for physical education classes. The district is looking at one scenario in which FEMA repair funds could be used to build a new metal pole barn type building for a temporary gymnasium. The building could be designed to be wet proof, meaning it could be hosed out in the case of another flood. The building could be constructed to include shower and restroom facilities and could potentially be used as a public recreation facility by the community when the schools relocate.

The district staff and school board have spent countless hours sorting through the funding, repair and mitigation possibilities that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has put on the table, weighing the possible options. All of the options from FEMA are available only after all insurance funds have been used.

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