

# Is Watershed Clean Up Being Ignored?

By Scott Laird

Maggie Peyton is getting frustrated.

Peyton, the Director of the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC), has been concerned about the debris, garbage, and toxic and hazardous waste that ended up in the Nehalem River during the flood of 2007. She is trying to find out how it is going to be cleaned up, who is responsible, and when it will happen ever since the first days that recovery and clean up began. As she found out, not much is being done about it.

Peyton has raised her concerns at initial public meetings in Vernonia after the flood to the Columbia County Flood Relief, to county authorities, to the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As of early March, no one was interested in taking responsibility. "I can get volunteers to do the clean up," said Peyton. "But who is going to pay to haul away what we collect?"

Peyton has already organized one clean up day that took place on March 8. "We had twenty people come out," said Peyton. "They filled two large thirty yard dumpsters, and we covered less than two miles of river. It's one hundred miles from here to the ocean that was flooded, and there is debris all along the banks."

Peyton was initially frustrated with her conversations with DEQ. "I called them and asked for help. All they told us to do is not handle it and mark where it is. They have not offered any help with resources to get the river cleaned up."

After a recent call by Vernonia's Voice to Oregon DEQ asking what is being done to clean up the Nehalem River, Peyton was contacted by a representative of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). According to the EPA, it is not clearly defined how this type of cleanup is supposed to happen. Peyton was told that ultimately it is



the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) who is responsible although it may fall on Oregon Emergency Management. "I talked with FEMA people here in Vernonia, and they said they couldn't help," said Peyton. "No one has contacted me from Oregon Emergency Management either."

Vernonia's Voice spoke with Audrey O'Brien who is the regional Solid Waste Manager for DEQ. She said that DEQ doesn't have teams available to respond to these kinds of events to do full cleanups. If hazardous waste is identified, she suggested contacting the Oregon Emergency Response System (OERS), a state agency under Oregon Emergency Management. They would then determine what kind of response was needed at individual locations. "An event needs to be triggered by the response system," said O'Brien. "Then an evaluation can be done, the appropriate agencies contacted and the type of response instigated."

"This is a problem on a state level," said O'Brien. "We just don't have the resources to sweep the river. As a state we need to do better to provide for these types of events."

"We are asking now to coordinate with the Oregon Emergency Response System and the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council when they are planning more clean ups," said O'Brien.

Peyton has gotten some promises of help from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board for assistance in identifying areas for clean up. The Vernonia City Administration is working with Waste Management to provide additional resources for cleanup.

Still, it appears it will fall mostly on volunteers to identify and mark hazardous waste that is along our rivers and streams.

Peyton encourages anyone who is aware of garbage and debris along riverbanks to contact her at the UNWC at 503-429-2401. If you believe you have identified toxic or hazardous waste, DO NOT HANDLE IT! Mark where it is and contact OERS at 800-452-0311. They will want to know your name and telephone number, type of materials involved, and the severity of incident - threat to people, property, or the environment.

# Opinion: Everyone Doing Their Part

By Scott Laird

As the community of Vernonia continues to work through the process of recovery from the flood of 2007, a number of large projects are moving to the forefront as priorities. One of those projects is the possible relocation of the Vernonia School Campus, which was the focus of recent and upcoming public meetings that the city is sponsoring called Vernonia 2020 Vision.

At the last meeting, and at recent school board meetings, the public was presented with a concept plan for a new school campus located outside the flood zone. Estimates for the cost of this project were from \$35 to \$50 million.

Does this community need a \$35 million school campus? Some people say, "Absolutely". "Schools are how a community is judged," said one local business owner, and father of a Vernonia school student. "We need quality school buildings, for our students and for our community."

But the question remains, how can Vernonia pay for a project of this size? Commissioner Tony Hyde informed City Council at a recent workshop, that he has just returned from Washington DC, where it is becoming clear there will not be large sources of funding available from federal agencies to help with major projects. The same is true on the state level. Hyde said Vernonia can expect some help, probably in the millions of dollars, enough to help get some projects started. We are going to need more than that.

The school buildings we have are old and have been damaged by flooding. They sit in the flood zone and probably will be flooded again if we don't move them now.

Already we have seen families leaving the community in the wake of the flood, taking the \$6,800 in funding the school district receives from the state for every student enrolled. When property owners leave, our city government loses property taxes, the major way the city funds itself. This should be cause for concern for all of us.

But all is not doom and gloom. Tony Hyde suggests that when rebuilding Vernonia, we are probably going to have to do a lot of the work ourselves. Already the County has hired Bill Haack to work on economic development, in the capacity of fund raiser and grant writer. Mr. Haack has proven to be a great resource and a cause for inspiration. Funding is being identified from private sources and foundations, and will probably be the way major projects are completed here.

And the best news yet- Governor Kolongoski is looking into bringing Oregon Solutions to Vernonia. Oregon Solutions, as part of the National Policy Concessus Center, helps facilitate innovative problem solving with communities by working across sectors, jurisdictions, interests, and issues. Having them involved would be a tremendous boost to the school project. An official announcement was expected at any time.

But we still need to remember, building new schools will take backing from the community. Any foundation that gives money to help develop a new

school campus in Vernonia is going to want to see support from the local community. Moving forward, we will all need to do our part.

Schools are the center of any community, especially small, rural communities. In Vernonia, the school district is our largest employer.

If we want new families to move here to replace those who have left, we better have a quality school system. If we want to attract and retain quality educators and administrators, we will need quality school buildings. If we want to attract new businesses and investment to this community, we need to invest in our community. And if we want to continue to provide quality services for residents, keeping Vernonia a great place to live, we need new schools.

**FARMERS**  
INSURANCE GROUP  
Symbol of Superior Service  
80 YEARS SERVING AMERICA  
Gets you back where you belong.

**Mark W. Burnett**  
Insurance Specialist  
Local Agent, In Vernonia  
Auto • Home • Life • Business

Bus: (503) 222-2969  
Cell: (503) 367-4498  
E-mail: Mark@farmerspdx.com

**Student Showcase**  
Thursday, April 10th  
6:30 pm  
Features: History,  
Art, Science, and  
Invention Fair  
Everyone is invited!

Banks Christian Academy  
22785 NW Fisher Road  
Buxton, OR 97109  
503-324-4500

**PAYROLL PLUS LLC**  
Vernonia, OR

Income Tax Return  
Preparation  
(Individual & Small  
Business)  
Payroll Services  
Bookkeeping

Edi Sheldon, LTC  
503-429-1819