

Food Bank Adjusts Hours

Vernonia Cares Food Bank adjusted its hours of operation as of March 4, 2008. The food bank, located within the American Legion Building at 627 Adams Avenue, opens at 10:00 and closes at 2:00 each Tuesday and Thursday. If a client works out of town and cannot visit the pantry during its regular hours of operation, they are asked to call the food bank (503-429-1414) to make special arrangements.

The focus of Vernonia Cares Food Bank continues to be to assist low income households and those whose homes were flooded. The income guidelines for low-income households are: for a household of one person, monthly gross income \$1,603; two person households, \$2,158; three person households \$2,713; for each additional member, add \$555 per month. Flood victims whose income is above this level but need grocery assistance may still receive a food box once a month. Registration includes names and birthdates of all household residents. A proof of address is also required to verify clients live within Cares' service area.

Director Sandy Welch states, "Before the flood, the food bank assisted about 120 households a month. Following the flood, we were open more days and helped

690 households (plus over 250 holiday food boxes) in December 2007. In January 2008, Cares aided more than 400 households. February statistics show about 280 households utilized Cares groceries."

"As the food bank returns to our former system of three days worth of emergency groceries given once a month, we expect our client load to level out to about 250 households per month. This will require twice the groceries from the pre-flood days in order to meet this increased demand. Right now, flood survivors' money is often spent on flood recovery building materials, and this short-changes the personal grocery budget. Food donations have dwindled, so we hope the public will once again step forth to help Vernonia Cares provide food for those who need it the most."

Donations of food or funds are always appreciated. Food can be brought to the food bank during Cares' regular hours or call 503-429-1414 for other arrangements. Financial donations may be sent to Vernonia Cares, PO Box 126, Vernonia, OR 97064. Receipts for tax-deductible donations will be issued upon request.

Getting the Big Picture about Flood Recovery

By Scott Laird

A recent presentation by Jim Tierney at a Flood Recovery Workshop was eye opening. The workshop was a joint meeting between the Vernonia City Council, Columbia County Commissioners and Columbia County Flood Relief (CCFR) and was supposed to help establish Flood Relief Policy. Although no policy was actually established, good information was shared among those involved.

Tierney was part of the community flood recovery effort after the 1996 flood and is buried in the process as county coordinator this time. Tierney finds himself in the unique position of being able to give some real insight into the after effects and consequences of flood recovery based on choices a community makes for dealing with the risk of flooding. One of the most powerful tools the city and county can have is a Hazard Mitigation program.

What exactly is hazard (in this case, flood) mitigation? It is identifying flood risks and causes and finding ways to reduce or eliminate those risks. It can consist of acquiring properties and homes, moving or raising homes, flood proofing businesses, flood control projects, and community planning for future development.

Tierney's presentation on March 17th, following a Vernonia City Council meeting, addressed how Vernonia chose to respond to the flood in 1996 versus what he is recommending should be done this time. He called the community response in '96 "inadequate," meaning that we did not understand the need to be much more aggressive in our response. What he suggests is that the city and county be more "interventionist" this time, meaning more proactive, thoughtful and aggressive - in our fund raising, in our policy setting, in the personal choices we make, and in how much assistance and guidance we accumulate and distribute.

"I believe we all misjudged the situation last time," Tierney says. "This time, it seems we have all gotten religion." He believes that we must "make no more mistakes." His plan is for the creation of a seventy-five-year strategy to eliminate our risk from flood hazards.

Tierney distributed a chart that showed the circumstances, actions and decisions that he believes have led us to be at risk of repeated flooding. Based on his belief that we will experience another or several similar events in our lifetime, Tierney has also created a chart showing likely outcomes if the community makes better choices from now on.

The first chart shows how state and federal requirements, geography, public choices, and individual choices led to ruined lives, ruined schools, threatened economy, and unwanted enforcement actions. Among the detailed actions Tierney identified that led to those results were:

- A failure to enforce compliance by local government
- Land use rules that hindered development choices
- The location of our community at the confluence of three drainage basins
- The failure to obtain, maintain (by citizens) and enforce (by lenders) current flood insurance requirements
- Ill-conceived recent property developments
- Highway 47's function as a dike
- No real storm water management plan
- Short-term thinking including the belief that '96 was an aberration

Tierney countered this with his second chart. This showed how a plan that includes strategic choices, smart public investment, a healthy business climate, and smart growth will hopefully lead to a clear and open flood plain, efficient sewage treatment, safe school and community facilities, an increasing tax base, healthy real estate values, and business investment. Actions identified as leading to these outcomes included:

- The eventual conversion of land below the Rock Creek Bridge into green space

- Working towards eventually clearing the "tree streets" of all development
- An efficient drainage of the mill site
- Building a new "green" school campus on high ground- then planning development around that new location
- Inclusion of city input during new school facility planning to ensure efficient infrastructure development and smart city growth
- Moving public utility systems to higher locations
- Exploiting cleared areas in the flood plain to encourage tourism
- Replacing Nehalem River bridges to cause less flood impact, and
- Preserving historic downtown Vernonia by making mitigation choices that reduce future flood risk.

Flood workers note that victims are surprised and devastated by these floods. "Working in the flood center gives one a clear sense of the enormous losses, personal and financial, suffered by flood victims," Tierney explained. "In our wildest dreams we will never restore all that was lost." He believes that local officials have an obligation to protect future citizens where they can.

During his presentation, Tierney also showed examples of types of individual projects that CCFR is working to accomplish. CCFR is currently identifying and securing funding to assist property owners with mitigation including: land acquisitions, home buyouts including new home construction, and home lifts and repairs. Tierney showed how - through state and federal grants, charitable donations, and the work of faith groups - many local property owners will be able to receive needed help to get themselves out of the path of future flooding. This mitigation will also dampen the negative economic impact of future events.

The process of adopting a more inclusive and encompassing mitigation plan also has some drawbacks. First of all, it will take a large amount of resources; Tierney is seeking upwards of \$10 million dollars. It will also take time, and residents are beginning to get impatient.

"The challenge here is to understand each owner and their property well enough to help them devise their best recovery strategy using their resources and those we have available," Tierney said. "We are working to develop the skills of our volunteer case managers and construction staff to meet this challenge as the resources become available." At this time, Tierney and Planning Commission Chairman Dan Brown are working to complete policy recommendations for the City Council and County Commission that will implement these strategies.



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