

West Oregon Electric Co-op Seeks New Location

By Scott Laird

When you are in charge of providing an essential service for over 4,300 customers spread over 1,224 square miles in five counties, you feel a strong sense of responsibility. And when you are unable to provide services because of elements beyond your control, you feel a greater responsibility to try to find solutions.

Marc Farmer takes his job as General Manager at West Oregon Electric Cooperative (WOEC) very seriously. The flooding that hit Vernonia, and particularly the WOEC office, and disrupted services for almost a week in December of 2007 has had a big impact on how Farmer sees his responsibility to his community and his members.

"It's our job to keep the lights on, plain and simple," said Farmer. "And during the flood in December we were not able to do that. So we need to find a solution."

Farmer has worked hard to find a viable answer to a complicated situation and is proposing a new \$6 million facility that will be out of the flood plain and will hopefully cost his Co-op members only about three dollars a month.

The current WOEC office sits in the flood plain in downtown Vernonia. It was flooded in 1996. On December 3, 2007, almost four feet of water flooded the building again, causing \$756,000 in assessed damage with still more cleanup to go. Ninety percent of the building's contents was lost. "We still have nine pallets of documents that need to be cleaned and salvaged," said Farmer. Farmer's staff was dislocated from the office for four months at a cost of \$45,000, only just recently returning to their old space.

Not only did WOEC crews have to deal with the flooding, there was also severe wind damage throughout their entire service area. "We had seven outside utilities come in to assist us," said Farmer. "We had everyone's power restored by Saturday, December 8."

Farmer recognizes that the toll of a disaster isn't just financial. "I am obviously concerned about the safety of my staff. There has been a mental and emotional toll on all of us, and the entire community, as well," he said.

Like most Vernonians, Farmer has come to recognize that it's only a matter of time before another event occurs that will put the Co-op building, his staff, and electrical power to local members in jeopardy again. "After '96 the Co-op knew they needed to be looking for a long term solution to this issue. Now it has really become an immediate issue."

Experts were brought in to assess the situation, initially looking at the current location and whether it could be upgraded. What they found was not promising: cost for construction upgrades that would only partially secure the building from future flood waters; a building in need of seismic upgrades; the need to build a second story to adequately protect the building contents; truck bays that couldn't be adequately secured; and the end result is a fifty-year-old building that is still in the flood plain and not accessible during a flood. Costs to do the seismic upgrades and flood proofing, including a second story: over \$2 million.

A second option was explored: moving a new office to the current pole yard location just outside of town. But concerns about the costs of extending infrastructure (water, sewer, telephone, fiber, power, streets) to the site, security, shared access, an inconvenient location, and still not being accessible in the event of another flood tabled this option.

WOEC also explored relocating along with a new school facility complex, but again the costs for site prep and extending infrastructure made this option undesirable.

A fourth option seems to be the most viable. WOEC has begun exploring a site on Highway 47 at the corner of Rose Avenue and Maple Street just as you enter town from the south. This is the location where FEMA has placed temporary housing units for residents displaced by the flood. The site offers a place above the flood zone that is secure, already has basic site improvements and easily accessible infrastructure, a convenient downtown location, easy access to the highway and fuel, and the ability to store materials from the pole yard which has been the target of metal thefts totaling \$45,000 over the past three years.

Estimates for the costs of a new building are ranging between \$5 and \$6 million dollars. Some of that will come from FEMA as 75% compensation for the pre-flood market value of the existing building in a buyout. A \$1 million appropriation has been applied for through the federal government. Grants worth approximately \$250,000 are being explored, especially funding to build and design an energy efficient project. Other funding sources are being investigated.

The building design currently on the table would possibly include a second level that could be rented for office space or give the Co-op room to expand in the future. Another part of the plan includes space for a new Providence Medical Clinic. "This is another essential service that needs to be relocated in our community," explained Farmer. "Providence doesn't build buildings, they want to lease space. So we could provide them with space and help pay for the costs of construction by leasing to them, and help the community, all at the same time."

So how will WOEC pay for this new facility? "We are hoping to raise as much as possible through grants, FEMA and the Federal government. The rest will come from a rate increase to our members," said Farmer. "For every one million dollars needed, Co-op members can expect about a 1% rate increase. I am expecting to have to pass on about a two or three percent increase, or between two and three dollars a month. What we are trying to determine right now is whether our members agree that this is a worthwhile investment: to know that their electrical power and system is secure for the next fifty to one hundred years."

In order to get the funding from FEMA, construction must begin within eighteen months. FEMA is legally only allowed to have the temporary housing units on site for eighteen months from the date of the disaster, meaning the site should be available by June 3rd, 2009, in time for the new construction to begin.

"This new location and facility seems to address all our concerns," said Farmer. "It gets us out of the flood plain, gives us a seismically safe facility, addresses security and theft issues at our pole yard, and is an investment for the future, for us and for the community."

Public meetings were being held throughout member communities during the last week of June with the expressed intent of explaining the new building concept and to get members reactions to a rate increase to fund new construction. The WOEC Annual Meeting for members will be held on August 23 at 10:00 AM at the Vernonia Scout Cabin. Please RSVP to Sarah at the WOEC office by August 4 if you plan to attend.

What's New With Columbia County Flood Relief and Recovery

By Susan Wagner

Vernonia, the surrounding communities and residents in the unincorporated County areas are making progress, slowly, towards recovery. We see it every day – sometimes it's another house sitting 6' in the air or sometimes it's watching a group of AmeriCorp kids heading out to help clean out underneath another home, install insulation or tape and drywall.

Everyone is in a different stage of recovery. Columbia County Flood Relief (CCFR) wants to make sure that every person and every household that was affected in the storm keeps in contact with us to make sure we are able to assist you with getting everything that you are eligible for. Currently we're in the midst of determining substantial damage and the associated hazard mitigation issues. These results may include a rebuild, a lift or possibly a new home. It is very important that you call us here at the center so we can help you.

CCFR is making progress on the many projects it is currently assisting residents with. We are diligently poring over all the information available including all types of potential funding. There is funding coming to Vernonia and Columbia County in the form of HMGP, CDBG, HOME and other federal and state grants. We expect these funds to be available beginning the end of July or the beginning of August.

Unfortunately there are limits to the funds, and CCFR is doing everything within its power to assure that the funds are applied in the fairest way possible. To that end, it is important for you to come in to make certain your situation is addressed accurately – your place on the list will be based on your specific circumstances. CCFR is working diligently to assist as many as possible with the existing funds and is actively seeking additional governmental and private foundation funds to stretch the money as far as possible. We are striving to balance all aspects of each family's situation to make certain all decisions are fair and equitable.

Our case managers are available to work with each client to develop a full work-up. Please call us for an appointment. We want to make certain each and every one of you receives everything you are entitled to.

The Columbia County Flood Relief Center is located at Vernonia Community Learning Center, 939 Bridge Street, Vernonia, OR 97064. Hours are 9-5 Monday thru Friday. (503)429-4948 – office (503)429-1070 – fax

Columbia County Rider Adds FlexRoute Service

Columbia County Rider Transportation has begun a new FlexRoute Service for Scappoose and St. Helens area customers. This new service follows a pre-designated route that includes fourteen stops at major shopping centers, medical clinics and other locations that riders may need to go to at various times in the Scappoose and St. Helens areas. The service runs from 9:00 AM to 7:00 PM, Monday through Friday, and operates on a ninety minute schedule. The fare is \$1.00 per boarding, allowing for an affordable transportation alternative for those needing to get to the post office, doctors' appointments and grocery stores.

The FlexRoute also allows for more personalized individual service if a rider is unable to get to a bus stop by allowing riders to flag down the bus when they see it coming. However, Bus Operators will only stop for pick-ups or departures at spots that are deemed safe and out of the way of traffic. Riders should contact the transit dispatch at 503-366-0159 if they have specific questions regarding flag stop locations or if they would like to be picked up at a certain site along the route.

Riders are urged to check out the Columbia County Ride website at <http://www.Columbiacountyrider.com> for more information about this new service, for the location of stops and for links, changes and updates on all of the transit services available in Columbia County.

New Park and Ride Location at Western Baptist Church

On Monday June 9th, Columbia County Rider, in partnership with Warren Baptist Church, opened a new Transit Park & Ride site. The Park & Ride site is located at the Warren Baptist Church parking lot at the corner of US Hwy 30 & Church Road. This new Park & Ride site offers an additional bus stop in the St. Helens and Warren area for residents needing to access Columbia County Rider transit system.

Riders are asked to park their vehicles on the south side of the church parking lot where signs are posted. Riders are also being asked to respect the fact that the church is allowing us to use this site for transit parking only and as guests treat the site with respect. Please do not leave any trash at the site.

Columbia County Rider reserves the right to make changes to routes and schedules as necessary to provide quality customer service.