

# Vernonia Town Hall Series Offers Information

By Scott Laird

Only a handful of citizens attended the Vernonia Town Hall Meeting on Monday, September 22.

The Town Halls are monthly meetings organized to help keep Vernonia citizens informed about flood recovery, school repair, public works, and other topics of vital interest. It is a gathering of city and school officials and an opportunity for citizens to ask questions and meet with key decision makers.

At the most recent meeting, the audience heard a report from school district Superintendent Ken Cox about ongoing repairs to the high school gymnasium and deconstruction of the east wing of the high school. Cox stated his hope that the high school locker rooms will be inspected and available for use shortly and that the gymnasium would be ready for use in some capacity for Homecoming Week, October 13-17. He also mentioned that there are about 400 sheets of sheet rock left over that are available for the community to use.

Jim Tierney and Dan Brown from Columbia County Unmet Needs Committee discussed their progress in securing funds through grants to assist with raising homes and possible buyouts. Tierney said both the county and city have each been awarded a CDBG block grant for \$500,000 and their goal is to secure as much as \$5 million in funding to assist flood victims with their homes. Tierney mentioned that a number of people are moving forward with home repairs on their own. Tierney suggested that these homeowners are welcome and encouraged to use the staff at the Flood Center as a resource. "People can come in and bounce ideas off our construction staff," said Tierney.

Brown said that they have received approval to begin lift projects. The Committee has been waiting for the first projects to pass a "Cost-Benefit Analysis" process, meaning that FEMA needs to see a dollar for dollar value for the cost of a home elevation to the value of the home. Brown said they are about to begin a group of the first five home lift projects which were going out to bid.

Tierney discussed buyouts. Letters have been sent out informing people that they may be eligible, and Tierney mentioned more homeowners than were originally thought may be considering this as an option. He also discussed that FEMA is reconsidering the flood map and may work some different scenarios that may increase the required elevation that homes need to be raised. Tierney said this may make buyouts a more feasible alternative for some homeowners.

Tierney also discussed the four homes that the Unmet Needs Committee are attempting to build into which homeowners who chose a buyout could move. This process is moving forward, and they hope construction will begin in October.

Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson and City Engineer Dale Merrill discussed Public Works projects including street repairs that have taken place, the removal of sludge from the sewer lagoons that was scheduled to take place at the end of September, and rate studies for wastewater and the wastewater facilities plan update that will be taking place.

The next Vernonia Town Meeting will be held on Wednesday October 22 at 7:00 and is scheduled to be held in the newly repaired High School Gymnasium.

# Planning Consultant Hired

Vernonia Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson has announced that he has hired Carole Connell to be the new Planning Consultant for the city. Johnson accepted Connell's bid proposal after he and the City Planning Commission interviewed three prospective planners.

Connell has been a public land use planner since 1974 and self employed since 1996. She is a partner with her husband in Connell PC Associates, Inc., and is presently providing private consulting to the cities of Gaston, North Plains, Sandy, and Wood Village as well as to Columbia County.

# Michael Kay Chosen as Interim Police Chief

By Scott Laird

Vernonia Police Sergeant Michael Kay has been chosen as the Interim Police Chief, filling the spot vacated by departing Chief Mathew Workman. Vernonia Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson announced that his decision to name Kay was subject to the city reaching an agreement with the police union that represents Kay. Compensation was also being negotiated with the union. Kay would assume the role on October 1, 2008 when Workman leaves to take the position of Chief of Police with the City of Warrenton.

"I'm here to continue to guide the ship," said Kay in an interview near the end of September. "Chief Workman has done a fine job running this department; it pretty much runs itself. Our biggest challenge will be lack of manpower and being able to provide the level of service the people in this community have come to expect while still taking care of the officers and making sure they get some time off."

The Vernonia Police Department was reduced from five to four officers this past year due to budget constraints and will be operating with three full time officers when Chief Workman leaves.

"We are looking at some options," said Kay. "Maybe bringing on a part time officer, or a partnership with the county. But whatever we do, we are going to try to continue with business as usual."

"Sergeant Kay has the knowledge of the department to run it effectively," said Chief Workman when asked about the appointment. "There will be some challenges with only three officers. I have told Mike he can call me with any questions."

The Vernonia Police Department may consider using office volunteers to assist with filing and to help have a presence in the office. Anyone interested in volunteering should contact Sergeant Kay at 503-429-7335.

# Community Pre-School A Fun Alternative

By Scott Laird

Amy Cieloha started the Vernonia Community Pre-School three years ago. It is registered as a private Christian school that meets in the Vernonia Christian Church on State Street on Tuesdays and Thursdays and offers children a chance to socialize, play and learn in a caring and nurturing environment.



Teacher Amy Cieloha with a few of her students.

"Teacher Amy", as her students call her, set the school up, starting with almost nothing. "Most of our materials are donated," she said during Vernonia's Voice's visit on the first day of school in early September. Cieloha was helping the children learn the routine of being at school. For some of them, it's their first time in a structured environment away from home. She said she works throughout the year to teach them numbers, shapes and letters, to write and recognize their names and addresses, about calendars and holidays, and "...whatever else is of interest." The school also has use of the church gymnasium for play time.

Cieloha has an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education and is certified in CPR and First Aid.

The Vernonia Community Pre-School costs \$70 per month with a one time \$25 registration fee. Students should be at least three years old and must be potty trained. There is a morning and afternoon session available. For more information you can contact "Teacher Amy" Cieloha at 503-429-0745.

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