

Vernonia Flood Stories Part II: The City (continued from page 1)

Even County Commissioner Tony Hyde, who was the Vernonia Mayor during the 1996 flood, and had experience dealing with this kind of operation, was unable to reach Vernonia, having left early Monday to attend a Governor's economic summit in Portland. Hyde was unable to reach Vernonia until Tuesday.

"The initial leadership came from the Fire Department and Emergency Response people," said Mayor Sally Harrison, reflecting back one year. "The Fire and Rescue folks were the hub those first few days-- there really wasn't much else the city could do. We did work to provide clean water, and help keep the lights on and provide central services, but, mostly, we just turned city hall over to emergency service personnel."

The City Council quickly established that there was a need for someone to take control of the city situation, and named City Planner Aldie Howard as Interim City Administrator, replacing Kline, who agreed to resign. Howard, whose gruff and at times intense personality rubbed some people the wrong way, was able to establish some order in the chaos, and over the ensuing weeks worked with local flood relief, state and federal emergency agencies, local government resources and volunteer organizations to begin the long road to recovery.

The city has been criticized about how they handled initial flood recovery in the first few months, including complaints of poor communication to citizens, difficulty in getting a straight answer, and delays and confusion around permits to begin repair work. There were also questions about the city's preparedness for handling this disaster. But there were also many heroes, and many things that went right. The immediate establishment of the Unmet Needs Committee, which began gathering data and matching flood victims with resources, was instrumental in the success in meeting needs the first few weeks. The number of local volunteers who dropped everything to assist victims was overwhelming. The State provided the services of Department of Corrections inmates, who helped with clean-up, repairs, debris removal and a host of other chores-- expediting the recovery in many ways.

The ability of the city administration to find outside resources and bring on board Grants Administrator Bill Haack, and Public Works Engineer Dale Merrill has made a huge difference in funding our recovery. The sacrifices made by city staff to be available to help is often overlooked-- Joann Glass, Jeff Burch and the rest of the Public Works crew, Vernonia Community Learning Center Director Jesse Jones, and Howard all spent countless extra hours on the job, working for our community. Local Police, Firefighters and EMS volunteers all worked beyond the call of duty for weeks after the initial rescue efforts.

"It took a few days to get organized and figure out who was going to do what," said Harrison about the city's role in the recovery effort. "The public works crew worked incredibly hard. I don't think Joann Glass has taken a single day off yet. Aldie Howard really stepped up for us, and, of course, the Police and Fire folks were outstanding. There were also countless local volunteers like Synda Allen who took time off from her job to manage donations at Lincoln School and Robb Wilson who organized supplies and volunteers. There were so many faith-based groups and volunteers who came and worked to make sure people were getting help. There were just so many heroes."

Things look a little different at Vernonia City Hall, one year after the Flood of 2007. Howard has resigned and been replaced by Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson-- a consummate professional who has brought knowledge and stability to Vernonia, and is leading the Council in the process of choosing his permanent replacement. Police Chief Mathew Workman has left for a new position in Warren, and been replaced by his Sergeant, Mike Kay, as Interim Police Chief. A search for his permanent replacement will begin once the permanent City Administrator has been hired. Mayor Harrison ran unopposed and was re-elected in November. Councilor Whiteman chose not to run for his position and has been replaced by Kevin Hudson, who moves over from the Planning Commission-- meaning there is not really much change on

the City Council. The Unmet Needs Committee became Columbia County Flood Relief and has been operating from the Community Learning Center building, although they were expected to move out at the end of the year and reduce their staff considerably.

Also new at City Hall-- Carole Connell was hired in September to be the new Planning Consultant, and Susan Spicer-Pond is working as Financial Director.

It appears that the city government has weathered the storm, so to speak, and is moving forward. There are still major issues to be dealt with: updating our sewer and wastewater treatment facilities, whether some kind of water diversion upstream to control future flooding is feasible, and a very tight budget that has cut into manpower in the public works, police, Community Learning Center, and administrative staffs. The city continues to partner with local and outside sources to get all Vernonia residents back into their homes, and to solve the issue of what to do about schools that currently sit in the flood zone. But Vernonia is nothing if not resilient, and there is hope that things will begin to get back to normal in the coming year.

As an additional note-- the Christmas snowstorm of 2008 identified some shortfalls in the city's ability to meet the needs of the community in a disaster. Mayor Harrison was adamant that the city needs to secure more resources and be better prepared to fend for itself in a crisis situation. Johnson and Harrison were both in agreement that the City's Emergency Operation Plan needs an overhaul. Chief Kay is already examining possible sources for heavy equipment and vehicles that would make the city more self sufficient and able to deal with emergencies.

Public Works-- Keeping Things Running

Jeff Burch, the Vernonia Public Works Foreman, was one of the true heroes of the Flood of 2007. First of all, Burch's home was flooded with close to three feet of water, which left him with the responsibility of making sure his family of five was safe and secure. Without a Public Works Director in Vernonia, Burch has been forced to fill the lead role in his department for a number of years, and found himself on his own with his crew immediately after the flood. Burch and his crew worked tirelessly those first few days, trying to make clean water for the community that needed to clean out inches of mud from their homes, and needed drinking water. Burch also was responsible for initial clean-up of public areas, including campgrounds at Anderson Park and Airport Park that suffered severe damage; neighborhood streets that were damaged or needed to be cleaned up; and sewer lagoons that were flooded. Burch was able to begin producing water a week after the flood, just as the city was about to run out of its stores.

In the past year, Burch and his crew have been busy. There was a large street repair project that was undertaken this past summer, with a number of streets that were flood-damaged being repaired and repaved. In September, the sewer lagoons were drained and dredged, an operation that was needed to remove flood debris and silt that was deposited there. Putting the parks back together has been a major undertaking, but they were all operational this past summer.

The addition of some temporary help through the MTC Works program, gave the Public Works Department some extra help through the spring and summer. The City also contracted with Dale Merrill, an engineering consultant who specializes in public works projects, and who has been instrumental in securing funding for numerous projects, including the street repairs and lagoon dredging, has also given the city needed leadership in managing those projects. Merrill is also advising the city on how to proceed with upgrading its wastewater treatment facility.

Who is Bill Haack-- And Why Do You Keep Seeing Him Everywhere in Vernonia?

One advantage that came out of the Flood of 2007 was the availability of new resources that Vernonia had the opportunity to tap into. One of those resources has been Bill Haack-- a housing and grants specialist who brings loads of experi-

ence in funding and project management to the table in Vernonia.

Haack has inserted himself into the community, working initially with flood relief and with Columbia County, and is currently employed as the Economic Recovery Manager for Columbia Pacific Economic Development District. He is providing strategic business-planning to the City of Vernonia and Columbia County by helping access Federal and State disaster recovery funding. He is a member of the Oregon Solutions Team that is helping plan new schools in Vernonia, and is working with a variety of private foundations to attract attention to provide funding to the Vernonia Health Board, Vernonia Senior Center and Vernonia Cares. He is also working with West Oregon Electric Cooperative, is the Grants Administrator for the City of Vernonia, and has led recent Town Hall meetings as well. He has also been hired as the Vernonia Prevention Coalition Coordinator, where he will manage the \$250,000 grant that they just received. He has even rented an apartment here in town, so he can stay and work late and not have to travel back to his home in Tigard every night.

So now you know why every time you turn around in Vernonia, you are likely to hear the name Bill Haack, or even find yourself sitting at the table with him.

Haack arrived in Vernonia after a long and varied career. He spent sixteen years as a carpenter in the seventies and eighties, and then worked as a Housing Specialist, Director, and Consultant in numerous communities over the last twenty years. He recently worked as a Community Development Block Grant program consultant for the City of Beaverton, providing oversight of housing rehab, downtown storefront improvements, owner-occupied repairs, accessibility repairs and multifamily construction projects. He served as a Planning Commissioner in Tigard from 2002 to 2006.

In his spare time (what spare time, you might ask?!) Haack enjoys reading and creating pastel art.

So, next time you hear or see Bill, say hello. He is here to help Vernonia.

Emergency Preparation-- Are We Ready For Another Disaster?

The recent resignation of Vernonia Rural Fire District Chief Paul Epler in December left many unanswered questions about Vernonia's Emergency preparedness. The recent snowstorms over Christmas emphasized that Vernonia has not done as much as might have been expected to be better prepared in the event of weather-related events.

The Fire District had taken some steps to be better prepared-- they had made arrangements to obtain a large generator to power an emergency shelter that was ordered and was to be placed at Cedar Ridge Camp-- home of last year's shelter. But that generator had not arrived in town when Vernonia declared a State of Emergency on December 22 of this year, and the city was forced to rent a generator to power their shelter. No new rescue apparatus has been secured-- last year, rescue operations were hampered by underpowered private boats trying to reach citizens through heavy river currents. Complaints that citizens were not informed about impending floodwaters last year raised questions about whether a siren could be used to notify citizens of a disaster-- nothing was ever done about that. None of this is meant to degrade the heroic efforts of the department last year during the flood. As a group, they worked tirelessly, putting themselves in personal danger to provide help to local citizens.

"There is always room for improvement," said Fire District Board President Steve Weller. "As a Board, we are moving in a direction to make improvements."

In defense of the Fire District, funding shortages, limited resources, and major expenses that were incurred during the flood have hampered their ability to make improvements. Deciding how to best spend limited funds that could be available is always a tough call. Spending money on rescue boats that really only have one use in Vernonia-- during a flood event-- might not be the best use of funds, and Weller noted that training requirements for water rescue are difficult to keep current. Weller also mentioned that they have made promotions from within their ranks, elevating Ben Davis and Dean Smith to Deputy Chief and have Dan Owens, Kristina McCord, and Luke Ellis in training to join Tom Ramsey as Lieutenants--to provide more leadership--and the department and board have made valiant efforts to recruit more volunteers.

"We have worked to make sure that we have systems in place to take care of our volunteers and their families in an emergency, so they are available to help the rest of the community. It gives us more resources," said Weller explaining another improvement. "During this last snowstorm, our volunteers were ready to go to work, and they performed well."

The hope is that this latest emergency in Vernonia will provide incentive to try to secure additional resources and make some additional improvements.



Downtown Vernonia on December 3, 2007



Crowds showed up for Town Hall meetings immediately after the flood



Synda Allen, one of the many volunteers who helped with flood relief



Bill Haack