

Epler Resigns As Fire Chief

Vernonia Fire Chief Paul Epler has resigned his position, according to the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District Board. Board President Steve Weller confirmed Epler's resignation, stating that the Board had met in Executive session on December 9, and that during the regular meeting immediately following the executive session, Epler tendered his resignation, which the Board then accepted.

Weller explained that the Board would be looking to fill the position-- possibly by hiring an Interim Chief, before actively pursuing a permanent replacement for Epler.

Who Pays For a Declared Emergency?

When the City of Vernonia was forced to declare a State of Emergency in December, it took on numerous expenses and un-budgeted costs. With the city already on unstable financial ground, who ends up footing the bill for those emergency costs is a question on the minds of many citizens.

According to Interim City Administrator Jim Johnson, there is a direct line that is followed when requesting resources. When the city has exhausted its resources in an emergency, it contacts the county; when the county's ability to deal with a situation is depleted, it goes to the state; the state refers major situations to the federal government.

"Because of Vernonia's isolation from the county seat and other cities, we are forced to look out for ourselves," said Johnson. "This is likely to be the case in the future, as well.

"It became very clear that we couldn't handle everything that was going on with the snow and no power and so forth, without some assistance from somebody else," said Johnson. "And you only get that assistance by declaring an emergency. We asked for the help that is available through an Emergency Operations Plan. We just don't have the kind of equipment you need to handle this size snow-fall.

"I would do the same thing again, given similar circumstances," said Johnson, when asked, in hindsight, whether the city made the right decision in declaring an emergency.

"The other thing is, you can't get reimbursed for expenses, if you don't declare an emergency," continued Johnson. "We may or may not get reimbursed for this. We're going to work hard to prove that we deserve to be reimbursed. There are expenses that are involved in establishing a shelter, paying for the food, gas for generators, and snow removal." Johnson noted that the city intends to research all avenues for reimbursement.

Initial estimates for expenses from the emergency were \$68,666.63. Johnson noted that that total included both direct and indirect costs, which included time for some city staff who are on salary and won't actually be paid for their time spent working during the emergency.

This most recent situation has prompted city officials to begin looking at ways to be better prepared. Mayor Sally Harrison has expressed a desire for the city to be more self-sufficient in emergencies. Purchasing large generators, and rescue equipment through military sources is one option that will be explored, according to Interim Police Chief Mike Kay. Leasing four-wheel-drive jeeps is another option. Expanding training and recruitment for Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) crews is something else that was already being considered, and that Johnson is in favor of. The city is planning to hold at least two After-action meetings to brainstorm about what went well and what could be done better during future events.

The bottom line is that both the state and federal governments probably need to sign off on a declaration of emergency, and if no reimbursement is forthcoming, the city may find itself on the hook for expenses incurred. Where they will find the funding remains to be determined.

Columbia County Flood Relief Update

By Jill Hult

Columbia County Flood Relief (CCFR) has relocated to 850 Maple Street between Mariolino's and Sentry. Clients may access the main office from Maple Street.

Along with moving their offices, CCFR will be going through a reduction in staff as of December 31, 2008. CCFR was fortunate to receive staffing assistance through an emergency employment grant awarded by the Department of Labor through the Workforce Investment Act at the request of Columbia County and administered by Management Training Corp (MTC). CCFR was able to employ eleven people who qualified by living in the County and by being unemployed at the time of the disaster or unemployed due to the disaster. The grant was originally for a six months, but was awarded an extension until December 31, 2008 because of the amount of work being done for flood recovery. Dan Brown, Deputy Director of Columbia County Flood Relief said "The efforts of our recovery would have been greatly hampered without the assistance of this grant. We greatly appreciate everyone who worked on our behalf to ensure we had the staff to get the job done."

The Flood Relief Center has adjusted its' operations to accommodate for this change. Dan Brown added "Our goal is to continue to serve the needs of our clients with as little interruption as possible. We will still be around to aid in the ongoing recovery."

With the reduction in staff and the smaller configuration of the new office, the Flood Relief Center is asking clients to call and make an appointment rather than walking in. Office hours will remain Monday - Friday from 9:00AM - 5:00 Please call 503-429-4948 for assistance with your particular recovery needs.

City to Retain Johnson as Administrator

At a special meeting of the Vernonia City Council on December 26, council agreed to retain Jim Johnson in an Administration capacity. Johnson, who was hired as Interim City Administrator, will be rehired as an Independent Consultant, which limits his ability to directly supervise city employees, but does allow him to continue his work with the city. Johnson was restricted to how many hours he could work under guidelines that administer PERS benefits he is currently receiving, and was scheduled to end his employment with Vernonia in February. The new agreement will extend his stay for approximately six more months.

Johnson made the suggestion to council to restructure his contract. Johnson explained that the new format will require the city council to directly supervise staff, which would probably take the shape of weekly meetings with councilors, city department heads and Johnson, and would include guidance from him. Johnson will still be able to prepare and present staff reports and oversee city projects. Council agreed to this format.

Council will be required to create a new ordinance which will outline the details of the new agreement and structure of Johnson's employment and responsibilities. That contract is expected to be created during a work session at the January 5, 2009, City Council Meeting. The ordinance will then be read twice-- once at the January 19 council meeting, and then adopted and take effect at the February 2 meeting. The city is also required to suspend the current ordinance that establishes the City Administrator position.

Johnson has been assisting the city in its search for a permanent City Administrator. Recent interviews produced a top candidate, who then rejected the city's contract offer. Council agreed at the December 26 meeting to not offer a contract to any of the other candidates, thus necessitating the need to re-negotiate Johnson's contract, and restart the hiring search.

Vernonia Police Officers Give a Helping Hand

The officers of Vernonia's Police Department have been making extra contributions to the community, that have been coming out of their own pockets. This year, they replaced a Santa suit that was destroyed in last year's flood. The suit is used by Vernonia Cares during the annual Lighted Parade, and helps bring holiday joy each year to the children of Vernonia.

Each month, Vernonia's officers make contributions to a Union Representation Fund. Portions of that fund that are not used can be donated to community needs that the officers choose. In the past, the officers have donated to help pay for a Homecoming fireworks display, made a donation to Echoing Evergreen Day Camp for kids, and this year they replaced the Santa suit.

"I just wanted to give our local police force a pat on the back," said Janelle Thomas-Cedergreen, who helps organize the Lighted Parade each year, and appreciated the donation from the Vernonia officers.

The officers have also paid for outside trainers for the Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) training, donated time to prepare and participate in the SKID program which encourages students to not drink and drive, and have volunteered to chaperone the high-school prom, as well as volunteered their time to help with traffic control for the Lighted Parade.

County Commissioners Meet in Vernonia for Airport Hearing

By Scott Laird

Columbia County Commissioners met in Vernonia on December 1, 2008, to hear testimony concerning the industrial development proposed by Tim and Michele Bero on private property next to the Vernonia Airport. The development plan requires a zone change, and is being opposed by neighbors to Bero's property. The development has also been supported by some Vernonia citizens. The Bero's request for the zone change was rejected by the County Planning Commission by a vote of 3-2 in October, and was then referred to the County Commissioners, who stated their intention to make a decision when they meet on January 21.

The Chair of the County Commissioners, Tony Hyde from Vernonia, announced at the beginning of the Hearing that they would only hear new testimony that had not been presented already to the Planning Commission. The commissioners first heard a staff report from County Planner Glen Higgins, who noted that his office recommends approval of the development. Speaking in favor of the development was Andrew Glomb, a Polish airplane manufacturer, who had traveled from Poland and expressed his intention to partner with Bero to manufacture light aircraft at the new development. Also speaking in favor were several area residents, business owners, and Sally Harrison who stated she was testifying as a citizen of Vernonia, and not as the Mayor.

Speaking in opposition to the proposed development were several neighbors who live across the street from the Bero's property, John Burns--an airport and zoning expert, Mike Sheehan--an attorney from Scappoose and Pat Zimmerman-- who's expertise includes land use issues ,and who ran against Hyde for his County Commission position this past November.

The hearing was often tense with several terse exchanges between Commissioner Hyde and opponents to the project. Heather Hines began her testimony in opposition by chastising the proponents of the project for their rude and disrespectful behavior towards the opponents during the hearing.

At question is whether the County can grant the exception needed for a zone change from Primary Forest (PF-76) to Rural Airport Industrial (AI). Opponents have raised questions about road access to the site; about whether the county is required to look at other potential sites within the county before granting the exception; about how many jobs will be created and how many workers will be traveling into the area on a daily basis; the size of the industrial buildings and what exactly will be manufactured; infrastructure and utilities; and how nearby development might affect future high water events in the area.

The Bero's and their representatives continue to state their intention to provide flexible manufacturing space for airport related products, with the hope of providing living wage jobs for members of the Vernonia Community.

Complicating the County Commissioners decision is that Commissioner Joe Corsiglia was voted out of office in November and will be replaced by Earl Fisher in January. Corsiglia was the Commissioner that heard testimony at the hearing in Vernonia, but Fisher will be part of the Commission that makes the final decision.

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