

# What's the Plan, Stan? A Monthly Update on City Planning

By Seth Lenhearts

First, I would like to wish everyone a happy new year and thank the many people who have welcomed me to this great community. I can only say positive things about the City and the people I have met. The weather on the other hand...

After snowstorms, power outages and multiple flood warnings, I imagine I am not the only one who was happy to see 2008 come to an end. I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who worked extremely long hours and the individuals and groups who volunteered their services. Thanks to their sacrifices, Vernonia was prepared for what was looking like a very serious event.

Often, emergencies like the one we just experienced tend to bring people's attention back to the importance of planning. For me, personally, I decided to enter the field of planning after living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. As I watched and lived the mess that ensued, I began asking who the people that make planning decisions are. In the following weeks, I started working with a downtown revitalization team and eventually pursued a degree in Land Use Planning, which I completed in the spring of 2008.

This past October I began working with the City of Vernonia as a participant of the RARE program\* (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments). My primary project while working here will be to update parts of Vernonia's comprehensive plan. A comprehensive plan is a land-use document that provides a framework and policy direction for the City in areas such as, but not limited to: transportation, housing, parks and recreation, economic development and public facilities.

So, where are we now on this project? Step one, we are currently working to determine what we have and clarifying the current land situation. Think about it like this: When you go to the gas station and the attendant asks you how much gas you would like, what do you do? If you're like me, you first check a couple of things or ask yourself a few questions before responding. You might ask yourself how full the tank is, how much money you have or how much gas you will need to get to your next destination? In planning, this is called the "what do you have stage." Once you have made that determination, you can then decide what you want or, in this example, how much gas to put in your car.

With city planning, instead of questions related to the gas tank, I am asking questions like, how many acres are vacant in the city of Vernonia, how many commercial lots are available, what the state of our roads is and how much land is in the flood plain. Information-gathering questions like these will have to be asked and, more importantly, answered about each section of the comprehensive plan. Although this is a tedious task, it is necessary to know what the current situation is before we can decide what we really need and want.

Unfortunately, I am almost out of space and have not been able to give much detail about the planning projects underway. That will have to wait for next month's article. In the March edition, I would like to discuss an exciting new tool in Vernonia's planning arsenal, called Geographic Information Systems (or GIS) and give a summary of what the Planning Commission would like to achieve in 2009.

Until then, you don't have to be coy, Roy, just listen to me.

\*The RARE program is administered through the University of Oregon's Community Service Center and receives much of its funding through AmeriCorps.

# Vernonia Passes Dangerous Building Ordinance

The City of Vernonia has passed an ordinance which is designed to allow the city designated building official to regulate and control what would be termed "dangerous buildings." The ordinance defines dangerous buildings and adopted the "Uniform Code for the Abatement of Dangerous Buildings," a 1997 publication that standardizes provisions and procedures for jurisdictions dealing with building code enforcement issues.

According to the Uniform Code, if properly followed it will provide building officials with "...the proper legal steps in abating dilapidated, defective buildings which endanger life, health, property and public safety...." "The Uniform Code for the Abatement of Dangerous Buildings" is an internationally recognized code and applies to all types of buildings and structures.

According to Interim Vernonia City Administrator Jim Johnson, the city wants to make sure that all commercial buildings have been repaired after the December 2007 flood. "We wanted the ability to intervene if we believe a building is in a dangerous physical condition."

The City had its legal counsel assist in drafting the ordinance, and has included the need for a warrant before building officials can enter any premises. "We would need to prove our case to a judge if we believe we have a reason to enter a building and make sure it is safe," said Johnson. "That gives us the protection of an independent third party, and makes sure the city isn't abusing their powers."

A Dangerous Building Ordinance, which deals with structures, is different than a Nuisance Abatement Code, which is concerned with clean up of garbage, debris, or other issues with property upkeep. "It is important to have both," said Johnson.

The city contracts with The Building Department, L.L.C., to provide code enforcement and to act as the city building official.

# Local Residents Participate in Ford Institute Leadership Program

The Ford Institute Leadership Program strives to help rural citizens enhance the vitality of their communities with courses to broaden the base of community leaders, develop effective community organizations, and promote collaborations within the community. The series of classes is the signature program of the Ford Institute for Community Building, an Initiative of The Ford Family Foundation of Roseburg, Oregon.

Vernonia began the first leadership development class in January, and this is the third cohort of classes in Vernonia. Previous classes graduated in 2005 and 2007.

The Leadership Development classes engage a combination of recognized, emerging and potential leaders, from teens to seniors, in a 48-hour curriculum to build a network of knowledgeable, skilled and motivated community leaders. The 16 chapters of the curriculum cover such

topics as working in groups, conflict resolution, meeting management, project development, fundraising and volunteer management. A key part of the curriculum is a community project for which the Institute provides up to a \$5,000 match. The class practices its new knowledge and skill as it identifies and develops the project.

Rural Development Initiatives, Inc., a nationally recognized non-profit located in Oregon, provides the professional trainers to deliver the Leadership Development classes in the communities.

The Ford Institute Leadership Program, which was initiated in the spring of 2003, is presently offering classes in 48 communities, with 1800+ graduates to date. Four new communities enter the program each spring and each fall. When all communities are through the program in 2016, there will be

thousands of prepared community leaders; hundreds of strong community organizations; and scores of collaborations in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, California, the Foundation's region of service. The vision of the Ford Institute is rural communities across this region with the economic, social, infrastructure, and environmental qualities that make them great places to work and live.

The mission of The Ford Family Foundation is "to help individuals through organized learning opportunities to be contributing and successful citizens and to enhance the vitality of rural communities." The Foundation serves communities under 30,000 in population in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California." In addition to the Ford Institute, the Foundation provides college scholarships and grants for a variety of community purposes. More information about the Foundation and the Institute is available on the web at: [www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org).

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