

## Vernonia School Board Candidates Interviews

The Vernonia School Board has candidates running for four positions in the May 19 elections. Board Chair Kim Wallace and incumbent Ernie Smith are running unopposed. At Position 1, incumbent Jim Krahn is facing a challenge from Amy Cieloha. At Position 5, incumbent Cari Levenseller is being challenged by Angie Rhodes. Vernonia's Voice sat down with the candidates for Positions 1 and 5 to find out their views on some of the important current issues facing members of the Vernonia School Board.

### Vernonia's Voice: Why are you running for the Vernonia School Board and why do you think you are qualified to sit on the board?

**Jim Krahn:** I am running for the school board because I believe in education. I'm a strong advocate and supporter of education. I believe that with the circumstances that we are in as a school district and as a town, with my experience in my profession, I can provide expertise and assistance that will help move the school into the next steps of building a new facility. Obviously, my political connections have a benefit, my political experiences, my experiences on boards. I work for the Oregon Dairy Association and part of that responsibility is dealing with legislative issues. And I've been doing that for eighteen years. So I have developed connections over time. But I am running for the school board because I support education and because I think it's valuable and important.

**Amy Cieloha:** I'm running because I have been interested in school board issues since I moved back to the community six years ago. I have been continually going to meetings, almost every month. It's sparked my interest, and I want to be involved in the things that matter the most to me. And the school board is one of those things. This is where I come from, I was born and raised here. So it's important to me. As far as being qualified, I feel I have educated myself by going to the school board meetings and staying involved in the schools, by being part of the PTA, volunteering in the classrooms. I think my views are shared by others in the community.

**Cari Levenseller:** I'm running because I would like to see this school project through to the end. I have been on the board for ten years now. I have a lot of experience in all the different aspects of what we do as a school board, so I think that qualifies me. But also, I have gone through the bond process before, the last time that happened some time ago, when we were only short by a hundred votes, so it was almost a successful bond. So I have experience with that as well. I like to finish projects that I start, and getting the schools has kind of been a long time project.

**Angie Rhodes:** I grew up here and graduated from here. We moved back out here because I wanted my kids in school here in this community. I feel I have a real interest in what happens within those walls. I'm in there on a weekly basis. I'm at the meetings. I started going to meetings to get a better understanding of what the process was, and how decisions were made, what was going to be going on in the school. And I think having the opportunity to be part of that decision-making process and the learning process-- I feel I have a lot to offer to that and I want to be involved. Qualification-wise, I was on the board previously, so I do have some board experience which I think will help. I served just under a year and resigned because I got a job subbing with the schools and that was why I chose to leave at that time because it was a conflict of interest as far as the board was concerned. At this point, I feel I have a lot to say and I have a lot to offer and I'm ready to jump back in. I sit on the site council-- I'm in my second term there. And I feel I have spent a lot of time building relationships with other people in the district. And I don't have problems questioning things, and I think that's a huge thing right now.

### Vernonia's Voice: What is your position on building a new school campus?

**Jim Krahn:** I guess it would be two-fold. Sometimes this first part gets lost in this conversation. From an educational perspective, I believe it's imperative that the students of this community have as high a level of education as possible. And

that comes in a number of forms and one of those forms is facilities. And the facilities that we have in Vernonia, except for the middle school, are outdated and dangerous. And when a student walks into a school, that student should be uplifted, that student should be encouraged, that this is a place that I come to for learning. I don't believe that happens with our students, partially because of the facilities.

The second piece is from an economic perspective. When the flood occurred, we lost about ten percent of our students. If we are to be in that situation again or if we don't pass this bond, the economic existence of the community is going to be very difficult. We will see another mass exodus of people from this community if new schools aren't built, or if these facilities would flood. It's a snowball effect-- people leave, people aren't interacting with businesses, businesses fail, home values decrease-- way more than people would pay for new schools.

**Amy Cieloha:** New schools-- yes. New Location-- yes. We need to be dry and we need to be safe. I think offering a K-12 campus somewhere else could be encouraging to our community. My position is for it, for the right dollar amount that our community can handle.

**Cari Levenseller:** I think it's vital to keeping our community a community. The amount of funds that would go into keeping a school campus where it is right now are astronomical to upgrade old buildings that don't meet our needs now. So I think that's a vital process. We have to build our new schools in a place out of the flood plain where our kids can be safe, and have the newer technology that they need to succeed today, because we can't do that where we are now.

**Angie Rhodes:** I am completely for our community and our kids getting new schools. Someplace that is dry and safe. I'm one hundred percent for that.

### Vernonia's Voice: How do you feel about Vernonia residents paying a portion of the cost for new schools through a bond measure, and what do you think the tolerance level is for the amount this community will support?

**Jim Krahn:** This is really important, the connection between the bond that we will pass and the cost for the schools are not a one-to-one relationship. And I think this is really important for people to understand. The bond is not about the cost of schools. The bond is about how much we think the community can handle. Of course, most people don't want to pay more. So they would prefer that there was nothing. That not being an option, the board has taken a look at how much it would be. There is a proposed amount of \$13 million on the table, which the board has not said yes or no to at this point in time. That amount is a good-faith investment that legislators, philanthropists, anyone that might be interested in supporting this process is going to have to see before we get money from someone else. If we're not willing to help ourselves, no one is going to help us. I realize for some people, a couple hundred dollars a year would be tough. But again, if you're a property owner, if we don't pass this bond, your property value is going to drop far greater than it would cost you for the bond. Whether we pass a bond for \$13 million or \$10 million, the difference in a yearly amount is miniscule. Again, it's an investment, not only in the schools, but in the community.

**Amy Cieloha:** I'm for the community pitching in for a new school campus. I do have concerns about the dollar amount that is going to be. The economy is in a terrible place right now. The unemployment rate is just astronomical. The Vernonia unemployment rate itself is so high, especially with the logging industry not doing so well. It's really impacted our locals. And on top of that, you have families struggling

from coming back from not one, but two floods. Financially, people are really hurting. As a community person, I'm just really concerned about that. I'm concerned about putting more on top of people that are already struggling. I want the school board and the school district, the decision-makers, to keep that in mind. This is a small community. We have a lot of factors against us. I'm not saying I don't want this to happen, or that it can't happen. But I'm saying we have to be realistic about it. And we have to look out for each other and not just for ourselves. I think the least amount of bond we can get away with will be to the entire benefit of our community.

**Cari Levenseller:** I know that for us to get all these additional funds that people are looking at donating to our schools, we have to put up something to show that as a community we are willing to support this. The bond amount that was chosen is very reasonable and is being stretched so it has the least impact on residents. It's going to be difficult during these times. But it's a reasonable number. We have to look at what we gain for that money each month in taxes. We're gaining a better future for Vernonia, and we can't afford not to invest in our future. We can't afford not to invest in our kids. For me, it's vital. I live and work here too and it's going to be hard for me to pay. But I have to do it. I hope the community will support what we are asking for. The numbers that are being passed around I think are very affordable. I think we can make this work.

**Angie Rhodes:** I think it is necessary that as a community we pull together and contribute for this to happen. I don't think we can expect for somebody to just give it to us. We're going to have to fight and contribute for that. And I'm all for that. I want to see that happen more than anything. I have concerns with whether or not that will happen. If our community is struggling as much as it is right now, are people going to feel comfortable enough to pass that bond, and say 'Yes, but it's scary' or 'yes, even though I'm not sure what this is going to do, but we're going to do it to get new schools for our kids and our community.' So that is my biggest concern, can we pull together and pass it? As far as an amount, whatever we have to have is what we should do. But I think we need to not go above and beyond that and take into consideration where so many of our community members are right now, whether it's a low income family or someone who has been out of work for a year. We need to think about everyone when we are coming up with that dollar amount.

### Vernonia's Voice: If we are unable to raise the funding for the new school campus, what is your plan for the future of Vernonia schools?

**Jim Krahn:** First off, from my point of view, that's not an option. Assuming that happens though, the Board of Education and the community are going to have to take a deep breath and take ten steps back, look at the big picture again and put our heads together and move forward with some sort of plan. I don't even know what that would be at this point in time. The difficulty is, even if we don't pass a bond, we are going to need a large sum of money to make the schools that are here useable. Washington Grade School should not have children in it. It's dangerous. I have two grandchildren in that school. If we don't pass the bond, I don't know what the answer is. I do know that giving up is not the answer. Leaving is not the answer. Finding a solution is. The important thing to remember is, we have an opportunity at this particular point in time for the community to invest a dollar and receive an additional one to two dollars. That opportunity goes away if that bond fails. So the next time we look at schools, and I think anyone would be silly to think that in five years...  
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