

Pass the Bond, Not the Buck: Questions for Superintendent Ken Cox

Why do you think it is important to build a new school campus that uses new energy efficient technologies – so called “green buildings”?

When the school district started looking for architects we learned that ‘green construction’ and ‘sustainable buildings’ are pretty much the way building construction is now done in Oregon. So when I met for the first time with the different architectural firms who wanted to bid on our schools, I told them we wanted “the greenest school we could possibly afford.” I felt this was important, not only because we wanted to stand out to attract philanthropists to help pay for Vernonia’s schools, but also because, in the long run, it would save the most money in operational costs.

Since that first meeting I have found that there are two aspects to green buildings: green construction and sustainability. Green construction uses recycled materials as much as possible in the actual school construction and makes sure any left over building materials are recycled rather than discarded. However, it is in designing a sustainable building that the district would realize the greatest long-term savings. It is possible for us to build a school that uses 50% less heat than a regular building. This would save us thousands of dollars every year, which could be used to help pay down the bond and/or pay for educational improvements for our children. This is particularly important when the architects are designing a building to last for at least 100 years.

Vernonia School District enrollment has decreased since the flood of 2007. How has that lower enrollment impacted the district, the school budget and current school programs?

694 students were enrolled in October

2007. That number dropped to 604 the following year and currently is at 625. Since Vernonia schools are funded by the state at approximately \$6,000 per student, the loss of 70 or more students translates into a loss of more than \$400,000 and really impacts the kind of education the district can provide. This loss of state funding has already impacted the current budget, resulting in some staffing changes and layoffs. These cuts include: elementary music, the middle school counselor and principal, one teacher, and reverting back to half-day kindergarten for next year.

Do you think building new schools can reverse this downturn in enrollment?

I believe that once we get new schools built enrollment will increase. For one thing, the new schools would include the technology infrastructure required to ensure the teachers have the ability to use whatever technology is needed in the classroom. We also are looking into ways to incorporate the energy efficiencies of the building’s technology into the curriculum so students can learn about solar, geothermal and other alternative energy sources. It is a known fact that businesses often check on the quality of education in a community before moving into that community. Having quality schools could positively impact Vernonia’s economy, which would in turn impact student enrollment.

Keeping up with long-term enrollment growth could become a concern the district would have to watch. With this in mind, the district’s plan calls for building new schools that would be large enough to accommodate at least 750 students. The architects also are designing the building to allow for inexpensive expansion options that would accommodate 1,000 students and more, if necessary.

The proposed School Bond, if approved, would raise about 25% of the funding needed to build a new campus. Do you really believe Vernonia can raise the rest of the money? What are the potential sources for that funding?

We have to and we will raise the money. The Oregon Solutions Team is still working on our behalf to secure stimulus funds and other funding resources to help construct new schools in Vernonia. The Team has made arrangements with the Ford Family Foundation to meet with a number of different philanthropic organizations to show them our new school concept when it is ready later this summer.

On the grant front, we recently were notified of our eligibility for a \$100,000 energy grant which would help pay for some of the green aspects of our new schools. We also applied for a \$750,000 energy grant to provide more effective lighting options in the school. These are the types of grant and stimulus funds the district is seeking and will continue to seek. We also are working closely with our legislators in Washington, D.C. on a bill that could provide even larger sums of money for schools that have been hit by natural disasters.

To summarize, we are leaving no stone unturned in obtaining the funding needed beyond the \$13 million bond Vernonia voters will be asked to consider November 3.

What happens if Vernonia doesn’t raise enough money to build a new school campus?

Nothing. We are living that scenario in our schools now.

For the past two years no teachers have left the district. Normally anywhere from five to ten teachers leave each year. The current economy may have some impact

on their decision to stay, but there is no doubt in my mind that the greater reason is their commitment to our students and their hopes for the future. They have hope in the future of this community and a desire to be a part of our new school, a school they are helping to design. They want to see their dreams and ideas come to life.

If we don’t raise enough money to build new schools, and I’m talking all of the money, not just passing the bond, then we, and the governor, and our D.C. delegation, are in effect pronouncing a death sentence on Vernonia.

Besides a safer location for our students, what other benefits does a new school campus offer the residents of this community?

As I mentioned earlier, I believe a new campus would have a positive impact on Vernonia’s economy. As a community, we have been in the national spotlight as a positive example of what can be done when community members pull together after a disaster. We can do the same for designing the kind of rural school buildings that will take Vernonia into the future, buildings that could be used in various ways as a very real part of the community’s life and livability.

We are working with different local agencies in the community to develop ways to use the schools year round for the benefit of the community. One example is the concept of a shared community garden. The architects are looking at ways to incorporate a greenhouse into the plans and have even mentioned the idea of an orchard. These kinds of ideas would not only help provide for the community, but would also be viable, real life learning experiences for our students.

Changes to Athletics Policies

By Gordon Jarman

There have been two major changes in athletic policy handed down by the Oregon Schools Activities Association that will go into effect for the upcoming season of 2009-2010.

The first major change deals with academic eligibility. An athlete still has to be passing at least five classes the previous semester to be eligible but they must also be making satisfactory progress toward graduation. The minimum satisfactory progress toward graduation at Vernonia High School is as follows:

Earn 25.5 credits by graduation day
Prior to the athletes 10th grade year they must have earned 6.5 credits
Prior to their 11th grade year they must have earned 10.5 credits.
Prior to their 12th grade year they must have earned 18 credits

If a student has missed getting the credits they need they can enroll in summer school to make up lost work and credits. This has to be done before the athlete participates in the upcoming sports season.

All incoming freshmen are excused from this requirement for the first semester, after that however they must be making satisfactory progress

toward graduation.

The second major change was the establishment of a dead week for athletes to take one more family vacation before the athletic season gets into full swing. This year that dead week is August first through August eighth. That means:

No coach, volunteer coach, administrator or any other high school personnel may work with any student athlete during dead week and no school facilities may be used during that time for training, open gym or any other athletic activity.

Physicals are being offered once again by the local Providence health clinic for those student athletes that are planning on turning out for sports for next year. Any student that has not had a physical in the past two years needs to get one before they may participate. Any incoming freshman and any junior need to get their physicals before the season begins. These are available to any student athlete that does not have insurance to cover athletic physicals or their insurance does not cover well child care. They can pick up the OSAA physical forms at VHS and they need to sign up for the appointments with Barb Carr at the school district offices. These will take on August 11th. Please do not wait until the last minute and sign up well ahead of time.

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