

Vernonia City News...

At the July 6 Vernonia City Council Meeting:

Mayor Introduces New City Administrator Young-- Mayor Sally Harrison introduced new City Administrator Robert "Bob" Young, who was attending his first Council meeting since joining the city staff. "We want to welcome you. We're glad to have you here," said Harrison.

Mayor Appoints Thomas-Cedergreen to VCLC Committee-- Mayor Harrison, with approval from the Council, appointed Janelle Thomas-Cedergreen to a vacant spot on the Vernonia Community Learning Center Committee.

Police Service Level Goals Presented-- Interim Police Chief Mike Kay presented Council with Service Level Goals that he and his staff believe they are capable of maintaining with current staff levels. Goals included: Immediate response to high priority calls for service; average response time to high priority calls of less than five minutes; and responses to at least 75% of calls immediately when they are received. Goals also included specified amounts of time spent on community activities, like neighborhood patrols and commercial area patrols.

Police To Enforce Park Rules-- Interim Chief Kay brought to Council's attention City Ordinance 761, which provides the Rules and Regulations and Penalties for the Vernonia Public Park System. Chief Kay stated that his department is beginning to see more problems since summer has started, and pointed out that Ordinance 761 specifies that use of the Park system constitutes implied agreement by the user to abide by the rules. Kay also noted that the speed limit in all parks is 5 mph, and will be enforced. Kay also pointed out that the Ordinance requires dogs and other pets to be on a leash, for pet owners to clean up after their pets, and prohibits animals from being allowed in Rock Creek immediately above the swimming area. There was also some discussion about where horses were allowed, including questions about whether horses were permitted on Webb Way and around Vernonia Lake. Kay said he would return to Council with more information about horse use. Kay asked Council if they wanted his department to enforce this Ordinance "...to the letter." Council recommended that Police enforce rules during the normal course of their patrols and be consistent. Kay also noted that, according to Ordinance 761, persons violating park rules can be asked to leave Park premises and repeat violators can be banned from using the park in the future. The Ordinance also establishes a fine of up to \$500 for violators. Kay stated that he intends to begin enforcing the rules at Vernonia Lake, which has become a problem area, especially for repeat violators who refuse to comply with the dog leash rule.

Chief Kay Addresses Rumors, Concerns and Questions-- Interim Police Chief Kay addressed Council and spoke to a number of issues. He began by speaking to a wish to place a School Resource Officer on the Vernonia school campus. Kay noted that, according to computer-aided dispatch records, between September 1 and June 30 of 2009, there were 200 police calls for service, along with twenty-four Fire and Medical calls at Vernonia Schools. Kay stated that the city was only planning to add this additional officer if funding is provided from a Fast Cops Federal Stimulus Grant. Kay also provided a copy of the report from the Portland Police Bureau concerning an incident involving an explosive device that took place two years ago at the school. Kay used the report, which he said called the device a "pipe bomb," to defend the Vernonia Police Department actions during this incident, and to defend the perceived need for a School Resource Officer on the campus.

Kay also addressed the fact that two of his officers were in attendance at the meeting to respond to the "unjust beating" they are taking in a local paper. Kay responded to numerous, what he called "articles", in the paper. "Unfortunately, we don't respond to those, so those perceptions become realities for some people... I want to respond to that right now." Kay went on to discuss two recent letters to the editor from two citizens. Kay said one citizen claimed in his letter that "...he's never called for Police services, that he doesn't need Police." Kay continued,

"We've had sixteen calls for service to his home address since 2002, including one on May 26 of this year for a disturbance." Kay noted that eleven of those calls generated police reports. Kay also addressed another letter from another citizen and said that the police have had 132 calls for service in a five-year period from the household of the citizen who wrote that letter. Kay noted one specific incident which was mentioned in the letter. "...She called herself and asked for the Sergeant to respond because her son was out of control with a firearm, and was walking around our town." Kay noted that in the letter the citizen claimed that police threatened to sic the dog on her child. Kay noted that the child is actually an adult. "I would like to think that one of the things you would ask us to do is if someone is having an issue and is angry, walking around town with a firearm-- that the police would deal with it." Kay continued, "You want to bash my department, go right ahead. But let's be factual about it."

Kay also spoke to the issue of officers not being "committed to the community" because they don't live here. "Nothing could be further from the truth," said Kay. Kay noted that Sergeant Mike Conner doesn't live here anymore "...because his wife works somewhere else, and he simply chose to drive up here in the winter, than have her drive." He pointed out that "Officer Dalryple...he doesn't tell anyone---he takes care of his sick mom. That's pretty noble, in my opinion." Kay continued, "I don't think it's right that we bash these guys for not living here because of other family needs." Kay concluded his remarks by noting that during the flood "...we all gave up our homes to be out there serving this community," and stating, "It's not fair for them to be getting targeted as outsiders. That's wrong... When something bad happens, these guys are running towards it. Not running away, not hiding behind a computer, not writing a letter to the editor. They're facing it head-on. And whether you like us or not, we're here... What are we going to do if they leave...? The Sheriff's aren't coming. The State Police ain't coming." Kay's remarks were greeted with a standing ovation by Council and most of the audience.

Kay later addressed one last issue. "I never intended to put in for the full-time chief's position. The garbage going around that my friends on council are grooming me for chief is just that, garbage." He also spoke to what he called "...the rumor going around that I am being demoted for misbehavior. Well, as you guys know from looking in my personnel file, there is nothing in there other than letters of commendation. So I want to dispel that rumor now."

City Receives Transportation Growth Management Grant-- The City has received a Transportation and Growth Management Grant in the amount of \$56,000, that requires an \$8,000 city match, to update the Transportation System Plan for the city, and will look at five main things to achieve: Analyze existing traffic conditions in the city; update street inventories; update roadway conditions; bike connectivity and other multi-modal methods of transportation to create safe routes for bicyclists and pedestrians; creating a Safe Routes to Schools program.

Council Approves Second Reading of Land Use Ordinance-- Council approved the second reading of Ordinance 859, which repealed Ordinance #'s 123, 618, 633, 669, 695, 705, 709, 710, 711, 721, 798, 804, 833, 851. The new ordinance completes the codification of land use and development standards into Title 9 of the Vernonia Municipal Code.

Council Establishes Non-Smoking Area at Swimming Hole-- Council approved Ordinance #860 which established a non-smoking area at the Swimming Area at Hawkins Park. Violation is punishable by an up to \$50 fine for first-time offenders.

Council Approves Request to Declare Property Surplus-- Council approved the declaration of miscellaneous playground equipment and a 500-gallon heating storage tank as surplus equipment.

At the July 20 Vernonia City Council Meeting:

Council Hears Transportation Update and Request From

County for Funding Assistance--

City Council heard an update on new public transportation services being provided for Vernonia by Columbia County Rider from Columbia County Transit Coordinator Henry Heimuller. Heimuller explained the new Nehalem Valley Fixed Route that travels twice a day from Vernonia, Monday through Friday, to the Willow Creek Station in Beaverton. Heimuller also explained the new Flex Route Service that is offered from Vernonia to Scappoose and St. Helens on Tuesdays and Thursdays and makes a round trip three times a day. Heimuller explained that Columbia County public Transportation ridership has grown 85% in the past year, the highest of any system in the state, and that Columbia County Rider continues to look for more funding to increase services to the Vernonia area.

Janet Wright, Columbia County Transit Director, made a request to Council for a community contribution of \$5,000 to help benefit and/or expand service for residents of Vernonia. Last year, Council approved a \$3,500 contribution. Funding for a Community Contribution was not included in this year's approved budget, and Council directed staff to report back with information about possible sources for funds at the next Council Meeting.

City Accepted into Main Street Program-- City Administrator Bob Young informed Council that Vernonia has been accepted into the Oregon Main Street Program.

Public Works Committee Narrows Choices on Wastewater Treatment-- City Administrator Young updated council on the Public Works Committee's efforts to find a Wastewater Treatment System to meet the needs of the community. Young informed Council that the committee has narrowed the choices of systems and plans from thirteen to four, and will continue to explore those four plans in more detail.

Council Approves Police Officer Training Fee-- Council approved the second reading of Ordinance 861, which institutes fees whenever Columbia County Justice Court imposes fines for violation of a City of Vernonia ordinance concerning traffic actions or criminal actions. Fees collected will be used to benefit the Vernonia Police Department for the purpose of training and training-related expenses.

Councilors Speak Out About Freedom of Speech-- Councilor Kevin Hudson read a prepared statement in which he addressed what he called "...inaccurate information" in a local publication. "I am disappointed that there continues to be false and inaccurate information presented in one of the local publications," he began. "While there was much misinformation in the latest issue, I am only going to address one point: There was no attack on freedom of speech. I want to be very clear about this. I wholeheartedly support and believe in the right to express your opinions freely and openly, and encourage everyone to do so." Hudson went on to address comments he made during the last Council Meeting. "I was under the impression that validating facts before you print them was a fundamental principal of journalism, so I made the following comment: 'There is a difference between expressing your opinion and making false accusations or unsubstantiated claims.' It was not an attempt to discourage anyone from sharing their opinion. It was not a suggestion that the media stop printing opinions from the public. It was not an attack on free speech. It was intended to point out a need to get the facts straight before you print them, and I am sorry to say that need still exists." Hudson concluded by handing out copies of his statement to the media.

Councilor Brett Costly also addressed Freedom of Speech. "I certainly support freedom of speech, but I think some people maybe don't quite understand the limitations of freedom of speech. Freedom of speech actually has a number of limitations. There can be limitations for obscenity, on commercial and political speech, and copyright. Finally, there are limitations on defamation. Freedom of speech does not allow you to lie about people to defame them. If you are lying about someone to defame them, freedom of speech gives you no protection." Costly also went on to explain that there is a difference between freedom of speech and freedom of the press. "For good or for bad, freedom of the press is a much more absolute right," explained Costly. Costly went on to detail how, in order to win a case of defamation against the press, actual malice must be established, and that, when writing about a public official, a publisher is not required by law to fact-check if they believe information given to them is truthful. "Legally, a newspaper is better off not checking facts, because then you can't prove that they knew it was not true. I have a feeling some people are taking advantage of this. When you read something in the paper about a public official, you might be best to check the facts yourself, because that paper probably is not checking the facts."

Costly concluded his remarks by reading from a pamphlet about what to do when stopped by the police. Costly pointed out that the pamphlet, written not by the Vernonia Police or the National Patrolman's Association, but by the ACLU, instructs people to: not get in an argument with the police; keep your hands where the police can see them; don't run; don't touch any police officer; don't resist even if you believe you are innocent." I have to think that if people paid attention to this, they wouldn't get tased," said Costly.

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