

An Opinion: Oakridge and Vernonia-- Similar Towns; Similar Stories-- Almost

By Scott Laird

A front page story in the Opinion section of the October 11, 2009, Sunday Oregonian told an interesting story. A small, rural Oregon town, with a population of a few thousand, formerly dependent on the timber industry for its livelihood, has struggled through tough economic times, but is finding ways to reinvent itself.

A re-emerging historic downtown corridor with a slew of new businesses establishing themselves in recent years, affordable real estate with mountain and river views, reasonable property taxes. Sound familiar?

How about this? A new ethnic restaurant in downtown and a new brewpub. Neighbors who look out for each other and step up when members of the community need help. A forty-five minute drive to the nearest hospital. Still sound familiar?

For those of you from around these parts, you might think that article was about Vernonia. But it wasn't our town the Oregonian was talking about.

That's right, the small, rural Oregon town featured in that opinion piece was Oakridge, Oregon, located about forty miles southeast of Eugene. Population 3,745. Formerly a mill town whose last mill closed in 1984. Largest employer is the Oakridge School District. Looking for funding for wastewater and water treatment facilities. A struggling economy. Having to lay off city employees because of tight budget constraints. When asked why people still want to live there, a local business owner answers, "Why wouldn't they? In so many ways this is a wonderful town."

At first glance, the parallels between Oakridge and Vernonia are extraordinary. But really it's not such an unusual story in rural Oregon. A slumping economy that was dependent on the timber industry. Aging infrastructure that needs expensive updates. Historic downtowns looking to re-invent themselves. You wouldn't have to look very far to find that same story all around this state.

But I still can't not be amazed by the similarities between Vernonia and Oakridge. Even the name of the City Administrator in Oakridge is familiar to Vernonians-- Gordon Zimmerman. Zimmerman was the City Administrator here in Vernonia in 1997, right after the flood. "It was a tough time," said Zimmerman in a

recent phone conversation.

Zimmerman says he also sees similarities between the two communities: Tremendously engaged volunteer base; schools that are the center of the community; a diminishing resource based economy; surrounded by forests-- these are some of the ways Zimmerman sees Oakridge and Vernonia as alike.

But one thing is very different about Oakridge and Vernonia. Oakridge has fully embraced recreational tourism and especially mountain biking as ways to boost their economy. Oakridge has given itself these two slogans: "The Center of Oregon Recreation" and "Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest." Oakridge is especially proud of their local festival, "Mountain Bike Oregon" which draws hundreds of visitors in July and again in August to ride local trails, camp in city parks, and spend money locally. "That's the resource we have, and that's what we're trying to develop," says Zimmerman.

Zimmerman notes that when 300-400 visitors come to Oakridge, burn a whole bunch of calories riding their bikes all day, and stay for weekends, they tend to eat in local restaurants. And they eat a lot! Zimmerman notes that the 350-400 miles of single track mountain bike trails within 50 miles of the town are a big draw. "People who spend three to four thousand dollars on a bike don't have a problem spending money to get here," says Zimmerman. He also notes the development of a kids' and adults' "Mountain Bike Skills Area" as a big draw.

Oakridge has other recreational activities they promote as well. "We have our biking in the summer, but we also have hunting and fishing in the fall and skiing in the winter," he says. He also mentioned birding, kayaking, and quad trails as popular.

Zimmerman stated that the city has actively sought grants to develop and enhance biking facilities and trails, and he notes that local businesses are finding ways to take advantage of this new economic opportunity.

Would it make sense for Vernonia to try to mirror Oakridge's success?

In Oakridge, the ability to cultivate entrepreneurial endeavors was fortified by a city staff person whose job was "enterprise facilitator" and who assisted twenty-one new business start-ups during the last three

years-- helping jump start that downtown revitalization. But that position was cut this year because of budget constraints.

In Vernonia, the Bicycle Skills Park, a facility that is intended to bring visitors to the area and provide activities for local residents, has been slowed by the Flood of 2007, but is looking to regain traction throughout this next year. Fishing at Vernonia Lake has become a real draw and is helping the city park system become more self-sufficient. City officials are eyeing development of a Disc Golf Course, a sport whose popularity is soaring. Sport Haus, a new Bed and Breakfast/Lodge north of town caters to outdoor enthusiasts and has featured Yoga retreats. Right now, Vernonia has a number of interesting restaurants, a local inn and two bed and breakfasts right in town, and a couple of city campgrounds.

Are there other ways local entrepreneurs can tap into this growing tourism market? Are there more ways the city can find to attract visitors? The local Chamber of Commerce is hard at work looking for ways to be effective and support their members. An Economic Development Committee has been started. A small industrial park is in the planning stages out by the Vernonia Airport. Small business development seems to be the wave of the future for Vernonia.

There is one last piece to the puzzle. A quality school system could be expected to attract young families. Those same families could be drawn to a region that encourages an active, outdoor life style with opportunities for hiking, camping, fishing and biking. Drawn to a community with a vibrant and active downtown-- to a town that encourages business, the arts and innovation.

A new school campus would be a great start towards that quality school system. It will attract families, quality staff, and resources. But a new building is not all it will take. To create a quality school system, a new emphasis needs to be placed on programs, on educational standards, on assisting the students who aren't succeeding, on providing alternatives.

Vernonia has a chance to re-invent itself, just like Oakridge is doing. It doesn't mean all our troubles will go away. But it could mean more opportunities for more people in this community to find ways to thrive. And that sounds like a proactive approach.

Readers Lend Their Voices...

Dear Vernonians,

Thanks to the generous gardeners of Vernonia who have contributed fresh produce from their gardens to the clients of Vernonia Cares Food Bank. These fresh vegetables and fruits add a healthy food to the menus of our families. There's nothing like crunchy, fresh veggies! Thanks for sharing!

Just a reminder, too, that the food bank will not be giving out **Thanksgiving** food boxes. Because this type of project is so expensive, we concentrate on supplying **Christmas** meal food boxes only. We will begin accepting applications for the **Christmas** boxes on November 3, to allow us time to order groceries. Let's hope the weather cooperates this year so we can successfully disperse these boxes about a week before **Christmas**. I'll be publishing more on how you can donate to this project and the dispersal date (in December) in the next publication.

Please call the food bank (503-429-1414), if you have any questions. We are located within the Legion Hall at 627 Adams Avenue and open Tuesday and Thursday, from 10:00 to 2:00 PM. Our mailing address is PO Box 126, Vernonia, OR 97064. Vernonia Cares Food Banks assists about 400 people every month with emergency groceries. Thanks to generous donors, we are your hands extended to the hungry within our community.

Sandy Welch, Director
Vernonia Cares Food Bank

Do you have plastic or glass bottles & aluminum cans stacked up in your garage?? Well you could donate them to a worthy cause! You can help me; Bridger Steward earn money for my 8th grade CloseUp trip to Washington DC April 18 - April 23, 2010. I need to raise approximately \$1800.00 for this to happen--right now I am a little over ¼ of the way to reaching my goal. If you would like to support me with your donations please contact my Mom; Kinnell at 503-819 0143 or my Dad; Jon at 503-819-2656. We would be happy to pick up your bottle/can donation from you. Thank you.

Bridger Steward
Vernonia

Thank you from the family of Myra Baska for your prayers, cards and flowers. Thank you also for the food for the luncheon. Vernonians are always there for you and we are very thankful to live in this caring community. A special thank you to the ladies who did such a great job of taking care of the luncheon.

Fran Fletcher
Vernonia

To the Vernonia Community-

I would like to personally thank the Vernonia Community Church for hosting the benefit concert for Darrold Mushatt. And all the artists and people who

helped make it a wonderful evening and success. Vernonia, you are AWESOME!

Mark Brown
Vernonia

To the Cast and Others who helped put on the Melodrama at this years Salmon Festival. Thank You!

Even with illnesses, surgeries, accidents and difficult work schedules, you all maintained an attitude of "The Show Must Go On" and indeed it did. I was so very proud of the wonderful job done with my meager words. You made the whole process so much fun. The audience seemed to really enjoy our efforts, too.

And, so bouquets of violets to you beautiful ladies, Sharon, Helen, Marilyn, DeAnna, Coral Dawn and of course the incomparable Bonnie.

Bravo to you stalwart men, Sam, Ron, Kevin, Zack, Bob and Burt.

To you lovely painted ladies, Sharon, Rebecca and Allison, hubba, hubba!

My dearest wish is to have the honor and privilege of working with you again soon.

Love you All,
Sally

Larry and I, along with the Vernonia Lions Club, would like to say thank you to everyone who donated to the Fishing Fund for Vernonia Lake this past summer. We would especially like to thank the Vernonia Parks Committee and the City of Vernonia for their donation of \$400 for this project to help stock the Lake.

Larry and I would also like to thank everyone involved with clearing the debris and trees from around the entrance area to Vernonia Lake. Special thanks to the City Public Works crew, the Vernonia Fire Department and our "coffee club" folks--they helped make some real improvements to this site.

Lastly, we would like to say thank you to everyone who supported the Old Saw Mill Eatery and fishing at Vernonia Lake this season. We look forward to seeing all of you again next year.

Gail and Larry Snethen
Vernonia

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