

An Opinion: It Was a Great Day For Vernonia

By Scott Laird

On Tuesday, November 3, 2009, Vernonia voters approved School Bond Measure 5-197 and agreed to \$13 million in new property taxes towards the construction of new schools. Vernonians took a huge first step towards our future, a future that will include a new school campus that is safe and out of the floodway. Sixty-one percent of voters clearly said yes to Vernonia schools, yes to our children and their safety, and yes to the future of our community.

On Wednesday, November 4, on a bright and sunny day after the election, the Vernonia School District held a celebration. Students, staff, citizens and local dignitaries joined together at Spencer Field, site of the proposed new campus and acknowledged the fact that Vernonians had made their down payment on a \$37 million project. State Senator Betsy Johnson read a letter of support and congratulations from Governor

Ted Kulongoski. Tom Gallagher of The Ford Family Foundation offered his encouragement. County Commissioner Tony Hyde reminded everyone that the Oregon Solutions Team is ready to go back to work for Vernonia.

Later that same day, another celebration was held in the Vernonia High School Gymnasium, and the excitement among the students, especially the younger students, was contagious. Balloons were everywhere, and it was obvious that even the youngest of Vernonians were thrilled with the results of the election.

But the excitement, buoyancy, and feeling of victory was somewhat short-lived, as on Thursday, November, 5, *The Oregonian* printed a front-page story by reporter Brad Schmidt that vaguely hinted with a sensationalistic headline that the election may not have been legal. Some questions had been raised by some people opposed to the bond. That was the whole story, and *The Oregonian*, irresponsibly in my opinion, tried

to rain on Vernonians' parade. The next day, *The Oregonian* tried to backtrack, with a staff editorial that appeared in the back pages that encouraged all Oregon citizens to support Vernonia in our effort to rebuild. I guess they saw the error of their ways.

It is clear at this point that Vernonia is not in this alone. The School District's Bond Lawyers say we have nothing to worry about as far as the legality of the Measure. It is clear that we have the support of many influential outside sources. It is clear that Vernonia has a tremendous opportunity. And it is clear that Vernonia is ready to move forward.

There are many questions that still need to be answered. Where will the rest of the money come from? When will construction start and who will build it? But one more thing is clear-- Vernonians have made their down payment.

November 3, 2009, was clearly a great day for Vernonia.

Is Vernonia Prepared for Winter? *continued from front page*

isolated and need to be as self reliant as possible, possibly for extended periods of time. It has also been an indication that upper-level emergency managers need to be paying attention to Vernonia and providing access to resources. "When I look at our plan, I see we have a lot of people on our team, not just city-wide, but county- and statewide," says Grace. "I think there is more interaction between agencies now than there used to be," said Young.

The city and community have been proactive during the last two years in order to be better prepared. Chief Grace will act as Incident Commander in the event of an emergency. Police Captain Mike Kay, as well as Sergeant Mike Connor and Deputy Fire Chief Dean Smith all have previous experience with winter weather events in Vernonia. The City of Vernonia now has a 4-wheel drive pickup truck and a zodiac inflatable motorized boat. Police personnel have done some swift-water rescue training. Young has done some situational scenar-

io training with city staff, in the hopes of working through some potential issues, before they become real. The Vernonia Middle School, which acted as a shelter during last year's snow emergency, now has a generator to supply back-up power if needed.

The Flood of 2007 caught most of the community off guard. Last winter, flood warnings were monitored closely by city officials, who met as often as every few hours to discuss emergency planning. It appears Vernonia has learned some things from its past experiences.

Of course, with limited resources, there is only so much the city can do.

"One of the things that really encourages me about this community is that there are lots of volunteers," says Young.

But the bottom line is that the city is ultimately responsible for providing for the safety of its citizens.

There's a lot to do," says Grace. "It's a huge responsibility. I think a city

like Vernonia that has been through this before expects a lot. When we have this Hazard Emergency Operations Plan that we are revising, it will be a great roadmap that will help people feel reassured that we have a game plan and the resources."

"We just want to be as prepared as we can," says Young.

Young and Grace offered the following information for citizens wishing to be prepared for an emergency.

General Information: What you can do to be prepared.

Chief Grace and Young are stressing "*Life Safety*." This includes having an emergency plan for your family; having a stocked emergency preparedness kit-- which includes supplies and drinking water for at least seventy-two hours; knowing your neighbors, especially knowing who in your neighborhood might be vulnerable.

Chief Grace is making a recommendation that everyone in the community go online and take *ICS-100*, an introduction to the Incident Command System. It is available at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/IS100a.asp>, and takes about three hours to complete. Its primary audience is persons involved with emergency planning, response or recovery efforts, but Chief Grace believes all citizens could benefit from these free training materials. "If everyone had exposure to that lesson plan, they would have a better understanding of what the city is trying to do," said Grace.

Real time Nehalem River water levels can be monitored online by viewing the USGS website. Search for "USGS water data," click on "Real Time data" which takes you to the USGS site. Then click on the Oregon map, then the dot in the bottom left corner of Columbia County that indicates "14299800-Nehalem River near Vernonia." This river gauge is six miles upstream from Vernonia and gives us a few hours lead time in the case of a high water situation. According to Young, when water reaches the 11-foot mark, it is activation time; 14 feet is flood level in Vernonia, and waters reached 19 feet in 2007. The gauge can give you some indication of how fast the water is rising, which can help you predict ahead of time when flood waters might reach Vernonia. This is a great tool that allows the average citizen to monitor current information and stay informed.

The Columbia Alert Network (C.A.N.) is a high-speed telephone dialing service used to notify citizens and businesses with a recorded message of important information. In case of an emergency, Columbia County now has the ability to target and warn specific areas. This system was used very effectively last year to alert citizens of potential flood danger. Land-line phone

numbers are automatically registered in the system, but Columbia County has added a feature allowing you to enter your cell phone, email, or an alternate phone number. You can go online at <http://www.citywatchonline.com/csbsignup/communitysignupcolumbia.asp> to register your additional information. Once you have registered and received the acknowledgment page, close the window-- do not refresh the screen. This new tool allows citizens to receive potentially lifesaving information in a timely manner.

Be smart and if volunteers or city personnel show up at your door asking you to evacuate, please leave immediately. In December 2007, volunteers went door-to-door suggesting residents move to high ground because of the potential for flooding. Most of those people ignored those early warnings and many of them needed to be rescued later. The city has very limited resources and liability issues, and may not have the ability to return at a later time to assist stranded residents.

Other Resources: What else Vernonia is doing to be prepared.

CERT-- The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) are local volunteers who have been trained with basic disaster response skills, and is still active and has added members after 2007. They are a potential neighborhood resource. Know your neighbors, know who is trained and who has what skills.

Shelters-- The city plan identifies numerous locations around town, including Cedar Ridge Camp, which has been used in the past.

Emergency Operations Center-- Chief Grace has recommended that the Vernonia Community Learning Center (VCLC) be used as the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), the headquarters for the Incident Command and Emergency Management teams. "A good plan includes a well-equipped, thought-out and functional emergency operations center," says Grace.

Loss of Power-- The city was in the process of securing access to several large generators, capable of powering the EOC, City Hall and running the city water plant.

Personal preparation, including having an evacuation plan, is the most important thing each citizen can do ahead of a possible Hazardous Emergency. Having cash on hand, an idea of how you will evacuate pets, and easy access to important phone numbers, medical records and personal medications can all make a bad situation just a little easier.

We can all hope that this year we don't have another weather event. But it always helps to be prepared.

Readers Lend Their Voices...

Cub Scout Pack 201 will once again be scouting for food. We will be out and about on December 5th putting a bag on your front porch for non-perishable items. We have a great need in our community and anything that you can give will be appreciated.

Following is a list of some of the items that can be donated:

Canned: meats, fruits, vegetables, milk, soups and broths.

Dry: noodles, rice, mac & cheese, flour, sugar and other such items.

Hygiene Items: toothpaste, deodorant, soap, shampoo & conditioner, toilet paper, paper towels, feminine products.

Baby items: baby food, formula, diapers and wipes.

Whatever you have to give will be appreciated. We will be back on December 12th to pick up the bags and take all items to Vernonia Cares.

If you have questions or donations you can call Nicole or Eric Larke at 503.429.5109.

Thank you All for your support and generosity to our community

Cub Scout Pack 201
Vernonia

THANK YOU to all who supported the **Strengthening Families Parenting Training** held October-November, **Sponsored by the Vernonia Prevention Coalition**. Thank you to VCC and Pastor Grant Williams for use of church facilities, Jan Dyer, childcare, Cathy Meyer, assisting, Capt. Mike Kay, DeAnna Pearl, Scott/Kate Laird, Leslie/Peter O'Leary, Julie Prohaska, Heather Lewis, Jimi Kolesar, and Tobie Finzel for family meals provided. Thank you participating families for the good work and nice evaluation comments. We appreciate all of you!

DeAnna Pearl, Director
Drug Free Communities Grant
Vernonia Prevention Coalition

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Vernonia's Voice welcomes and requests your thoughts, opinions and ideas. Please include your name, address and phone number, limit your letters to 300 words or less. Vernonia's Voice reserves the right to edit, omit, respond or ask for a response to letters submitted. We will print letters, space permitting. Deadline is the 1st and 3rd Monday of each month. Email to: scott@vernoniasvoice.com or mail to: Letters, PO Box 55, Vernonia, OR 97064.