

## Oregon Solutions Sees Progress On Vernonia School *continued from front page*

The concept of the "Oregon Natural Resources Center" was introduced to the Steering Committee. School Project Manager Steve Effros stated that the Vernonia School Project was approached by the Oregon Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) about the possibility of developing what they called a "Catalyst for Economic Development" for the community on the school site. From those discussions developed the concept of the Oregon Natural Resources Center which, according to Effros, could potentially create partnerships between the school district and the community with the Oregon Natural Resources Council and State Universities. The concept is still in the early stages of development, but is actively being pursued. Effros noted that there is the potential for an EDA grant that would assist with the construction. Effros also noted that one possibility under consideration is to move the current Middle School building from its current location to the new site, and use it as a high school science lab as well as the home of the Natural Resource Center.

Vernonia School District Superintendent Ken Cox noted that the Oregon Natural Resources Center only became part of the project about six weeks ago, showing the continued fluidity of the project and how quickly plans may need to change through the process.

"This has got to be the single most important thing we've been doing with regards to our school in our community," commented Tony Hyde. "We have an opportunity to create a paradigm shift for our community and our economy. We need to play to our strengths, and our strength is our remoteness and

that we are surrounded by millions of acres of private, sustainable forests."

Effros also mentioned that he is working through "value engineering" to create distinct packages for construction as a way to allow smaller and potentially more local contractors to be involved in the project. Including local workers was discussed throughout the meeting during various reports and appears to be a high priority for project leaders.

Effros also noted that the District has acquired some additional property from adjacent landowners at the new school site, which allows for a more flexible layout for the site plan.

### Financing and Fundraising

According to Keny-Guyer, federal and state public finance efforts are in high gear and the private sector strategy is about to launch. Much of the meeting included reports on various fundraising avenues, including meetings with large philanthropic foundations that work in Oregon, and the many different federal and state funding opportunities.

John Donovan, Project Manager for Metropolitan Group, who is coordinating the Finance Campaign, noted that it is in the closing phases of what they call the "Readiness Stage." "That involves setting up our systems so we can go out and talk to people and have prepared materials to share with people the story of Vernonia and the reason why this is still an important issue." Donovan reported his team has had positive conversations with all of the Oregon's congressional representatives and will be continuing to work with congressional staff during the upcoming appropriations process to craft specific earmark requests on behalf of the school proj-

ect. Donovan also noted that separate upcoming lobbying trips to Washington D.C. by Vernonia School Board Chair Jim Krahn, School superintendent Ken Cox, and Tony Hyde would be taking place in late January and early February. "As we move forward, I think it is important for you to understand we are talking to some of the most capable people both at the state and federal level about how to make significant contributions to this project."

The Committee discussed "Bridge Financing," which is the funding that will be needed so construction can begin as soon as possible, but will bridge the gap until all financing is secure. "Everyone needs to understand that our campaign for state, federal and philanthropic money is a two-year campaign," said Hyde. "You don't just drum up \$24 million dollars in six months." Hyde discussed strategies that are being developed to secure that funding through commitments from foundations.

According to Keny-Guyer, the Bridge Finance Committee has already been working with former Oregon State Treasurer, Randall Edwards, with Portland Family Fund, the Northwest Regional ESD, Shore Bank Pacific and others, to develop strategies. "We have some very high-level people pulling on your behalf and who are invested in finding financing for this project," she said.

Superintendent Cox reported that the district is still evaluating several options for the sale of the bonds that the community approved in an election measure in November. Cox reported that the

bond sale should close on March 31st.

Hyde and Keny-Guyer reported on the strategy for engaging twelve or so major philanthropic foundations in Oregon. Hyde reported that The Ford Family Foundation has been asked to help convene the foundations to create a collaborative effort for fundraising. It was discussed that major national foundations could be approached as possible funders, including the Kellogg Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and The Gates Foundation.

Also on the agenda for discussion was the possibility of a waiver from FEMA that would allow the community to receive additional Flood Mitigation Assistance Funds. The Oregon Solutions team is pursuing this opportunity.

According to Keny-Guyer and Hyde, the Vernonia Schools Project remains a top priority in the Governor's office. The Governor's Regional Economic Development representative, Mark Ellsworth, reported that, at a recent meeting, Governor Kulongoski was very engaged and asked numerous important questions about Vernonia. "We've got the Governor behind us and a great team," said Ellsworth. "There's great energy here."

Tony Hyde concluded the meeting with these thoughts: "Recovery is directly attributed to leadership, and we have some really good leaders marching forward on this project. That's why, everywhere we go, people want to help us. This is a community that is very resilient, with good leadership and that's why we're going to recover."



## Update On School Construction

By Dr. Ken Cox, Vernonia Schools Superintendent

After reading the *Voice's* article in the last issue about the new school being built in Scappoose, I felt it would be appropriate to discuss some of the issues that have been raised recently, and give you an update on our current status. However, since it would take half of this issue to share with you all that has taken place in the past few weeks, I will limit my comments here, and share more information at a couple of upcoming Town Hall meetings.

I have always been interested in how we can effectively bring as many jobs as possible to our community. We are working with the Oregon Solutions Vernonia (OSV) Team to look at ways that we can incorporate long-term economic development into our future school campus. We have invited members of local unions to begin attending the Oregon Solutions meetings. Members of the OSV Team have been invited to the next Vernonia Economic Development Committee meeting.

As was pointed out, our circumstances are completely different from those faced by Scappoose. Once they passed their bond, they were able to move forward with their design, because the bond paid for the full construction amount for various renovations and upgrades and building one school. We are working hard to put together the remainder of the funding for new schools that would replace all of the school buildings in Vernonia.

We continue to be transparent and as collaborative as possible as we work with our staff and community members to design our new schools. We spent most of a year before the flood discussing what we wanted as a community in our schools, developing a Strategic

Education Plan that was used by BOORA as they began the design process for our schools. We have shared all of the different design options for our schools with the community on a number of occasions. Most recently, we met with staff to discuss minor design changes that would save significant dollars without compromising the integrity of the design, programming, or its long-term sustainability. We also presented those changes at the February 4th board meeting and will be discussing them at a Town Hall meeting on Thursday, February 25th at 7:00 P.M. in the Cafeteria.

Prior to my reading the article, I met with Steve Effros and we discussed the need for us to reach out to local contractors and workers and begin to establish an inventory of local companies and local employees of regional companies that we can work with on the new schools. We will be addressing this topic at the Town Hall meeting and encourage local contractors and tradesmen to come to the meeting and give us your input.

In summary, we are moving forward. In the past three weeks, I, along with other OSV Team members, have had face to face meetings with Senator Wyden, Senator Merkley, Representative Wu, and Governor Kulongoski. They are all in our corner and will support our efforts at the state and federal levels.

Upcoming Vernonia School District Town Hall Meetings:

- February 25, 7:00-8:00 PM, VHS Cafeteria Latest design updates, how to include local contractors in school construction
- March 11, 7:00-8:00 PM, VHS Cafeteria (after Regular Board Meeting) Latest cost estimates, financing update and proposed construction schedule



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