

Proposed Vernonia Sign Ordinance Creates Controversy *continued from front page*

nesses and sign posters be responsible for policing themselves-- violators would be fined. (5 respondents were for temporary sign fees, 44 were against.)

After the close of the Public Hearing, Council chose to take no final action and sent the Sign Code back to the Planning Commission, recommending that the Design Theme be removed from the code, that interior-lit signs be reconsidered and that they remove the \$10 fee for temporary signs. It was agreed that since fees are generally set by resolution, that Council could decide on fees at a later time.

Leading up to the first City Council Hearing on January 19th, the Planning Commission held several work sessions and on November 5, 2009, issued a city-wide invitation for a public hearing, which was held on December 10th. At that time, there was no public testimony given. When several business owners became aware that the Planning Commission was intending to ask Council to pass a recommended Sign Code they raised concerns and a special work session with business owners was held to attempt to address those concerns. This has been a point of contention between the business owners and the Planning Commission. Business owners have apologized for not becoming engaged in the process earlier, but have continued to express their interest in helping shape the code which will ultimately affect them.

Brown and the Planning Commission have been disappointed that after all the work they put into crafting the Ordinance, with no public input, that they are being asked to make changes at the last minute.

Vernonia Area Chamber of Commerce President Donna Webb says the Chamber Board met and has decided to stay neutral on the issue and act as a conduit for information only. But Webb did have a few pertinent comments about what has happened so far in the process. "I think the lesson here is that we all need to be more involved in what is happening in our community," said Webb. "And we all need to communicate more and work together."

Vernonia's Voice spoke with both Planning Commission Chair Dan Brown and Marilyn Nicks about the issues surrounding the Sign Ordinance.

Brown expressed numerous concerns about the circumventing of the

process. Brown rejects the notion that the Planning Commission should have been more proactive in contacting businesses about the upcoming Sign Code work. According to Brown, the city did all they were legally required to do in notifying the public-- any more would have been playing favorites. "I think this code affects the people who have to drive through town and look at everything," said Brown. "It's not for the city to judge who this is important to. I think that puts the city in a very awkward role to say whose comment is most important. In fact, the city better not find itself in that role or it's crossed a line."

Among Brown's other concerns is the years of work and numerous studies, as well as the cost invested, to develop the marketing and branding theme of "Historic Vernonia." Brown cited numerous cases where the "Historic Vernonia" theme has appeared, including the two signs that greet motorists as they enter the community, the town logo currently in use, and the theme "Pedal to the Past" when Cycle Oregon visited Vernonia in 2005. He also noted that the first Ford Institute Leadership Program class chose "the unique history of Vernonia" for the theme of their archway project. Even the Vernonia Area Chamber of Commerce features a historic theme and the tag-line "Visit Historic Vernonia." All of those items, according to Brown, came from somewhere.

That somewhere, according to Brown, has been public input and studies by professional experts the city has hired. Eight studies, by Brown's count, have happened over the last fifteen years that have pointed to a historic theme and brand for the community. "All of those components have continued to build one on top of the other," says Brown. "When the Planning Commission meets, what we do is try to build on the concepts and tools we've been given."

Nicks states that her group is against the design theme because it is restrictive, that a sign ordinance may not be the best venue for a design theme, and that the public was not included in deciding if the community wanted a design theme in the first place, and what it would be. "It wasn't that we were necessarily against it, but that there was no public process that it went through," said Nicks. In fact, Nicks notes that the Vernonia Economic Development Committee were the ones who came up with the

"1900's Historic Mill Town," after being asked to come up with a theme. This was done without a public process.

A review of a number of the past plans and reports does show consistent references and recommendations that Vernonia identify itself with its historic past as a mill and logging town-- the specific use of "1900's Mill Town," is absent.

During the recent hearings, it was questioned repeatedly whether a sign code is the place to enforce a marketing strategy city theme. Apparently, Council agrees with the citizens who are against it, having requested it be removed in their recommendations to the Commission.

Brown discussed the role of the Planning Commission in City government. Brown notes that the city is required to have a Comprehensive Plan which the Planning Commission must keep updated through the passage of ordinances that concern land-use issues. "Certainly the Planning Commission has been operating for the last fifteen years thinking we've been building one component on top of another towards some kind of consistent message for marketing," said Brown. "As a Commission, we can't ignore all those things that have come from the past, through the public process," said Brown. "Otherwise, you're just bowing to a loud local minority in many cases."

Brown addressed concerns that a sign ordinance will cost businesses money in a bad economy. According to Brown, under the new ordinance all current signs are grandfathered in-- no one will be required to change any current signs. A date when all signs would have to comply with the new ordinance has been removed. A \$10 fee for temporary signs can now be bundled together so only one fee applies for all temporary signs and is in place to help defray the cost of staff time to review them. The sign ordinance would only impact new businesses or new signs.

Nicks, representing the business owners, argues that having each temporary sign reviewed and approved for a permit by a member of city staff will be time-consuming and cost-prohibitive. There are exemptions-- for things like garage sale signs-- in the current Ordinance which, according to Nicks, defeats the purpose of the Ordinance.

The length of the document has

also been raised as an issue, but Brown feels that the intent of an ordinance needs to be clear. Because of constant changes in city staff, intent and enforcement are difficult unless there is a written document which explains the intent of the ordinance. "This is difficult when people don't trust government to begin with," says Brown.

As for interior-lit signs, Nicks believes there are currently many good options that are attractive, energy efficient and environmentally friendly. Exterior lights are more intrusive, more expensive to operate and more wasteful. According to Nicks, business owners should be allowed to use the best options available to them. "To ban the option of internally-lit signs is not what business owners want," said Nicks.

Brown is concerned about keeping a level playing field for businesses. In his view, a lack of restriction leaves it open to the businesses with the biggest and brightest sign getting all the attention. And he doesn't think that's what Vernonians want. "Without a sign ordinance, a business can do whatever it wants and everyone is competing to have the biggest and best. And I don't see that as part of Vernonia's vision."

"The intent of this is not to create a hardship, but to preserve what Vernonia already has," said Brown. "And that's what this group of business owners is saying-- that they don't want Vernonia to change. And that's not that much different from what the Planning Commission is saying with this Ordinance."

Cedar Mist Studios



Deborah Steffen is a registered yoga instructor and certified hypnotist serving Vernonia for over 5 years.

Located 5 miles from Vernonia at 20960 Scappoose Vernonia Hwy.

Hypnotherapy

- Stress/Pain Management
- Weight Loss
- Stop Smoking
- Self Confidence...

Yoga

- Tues & Thurs 9-10AM
- Weds 4:30-5:30PM

503-429-2103
CedarMistStudios.com



StPierreGraphics@aol.com

BLUE HOUSE CAFÉ

BRINGS YOU THE TASTES OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN

FEBRUARY 13TH FEATURING

TASTE OF ITALY

WITH

SPAGHETTI PUTANESCA, MUSHROOM RISOTTO,
INSALATA CAPRESE, MINISTRONE WITH PESTO
AND FRESHLY BAKED PANETTONE

TUE-SAT 10AM-8PM SUN 10AM-4PM
919 BRIDGE ST. VERNONIA, OR (503) 429-4350