

VERNONIA'S voice

reflecting the spirit of our community

volume5 issue5

Rebuilding Vernonia, Part I: The Rose Avenue Project

By Scott Laird

The community of Vernonia is currently in the process of rebuilding significant pieces of its infrastructure. Major projects are currently under construction or in the planning stages. Over the next few months, Vernonia's Voice intends to take an in-depth look at some of these projects and talk with the people closely associated with them with the intent of informing and educating the public. In Part I, we look at the "Rose Avenue Project."

Most citizens of Vernonia have heard at least something about the "Rose Avenue Project" in the last year. The Rose Avenue Project is the proposed development at the south end of town that would be constructed adjacent to the new West Oregon Electric Cooperative (WOEC) headquarters and would include the new Vernonia Health Clinic, the Senior Center and the Vernonia Cares Food Bank. Because the project is still in the planning stages, not many details are known by the general public about the ongoing planning process. This has led to much speculation within the community about what elements the project will or won't contain and to what level the City of Vernonia will participate in its development.

The idea for something like the Rose Avenue Project began after the Flood of 1996. Several organizations within the community were looking to relocate outside the flood zone, but those moves never came to fruition. After the Flood of December 2007, in order to stay in compliance with National Flood Insurance standards, the City began to prepare to enforce its 1988 flood ordinance, that among other things, mandates that substantially damaged structures must be elevated or demolished. This effectively dictates that three of the entities that provide essential services for the community must to move out of the flood zone. After the declarations of substantial damage, the idea of moving certain services became not only a good idea, but necessary and the Rose Avenue Project took even greater significance and shape.

Those mandated by city ordinance to

move were the Vernonia Health Clinic--currently being operated by Providence Health Services, the Vernonia Senior Center, the Vernonia Cares Food Bank, and WOEC--organizations that provide services for some of our most vulnerable citizens--heat and electricity, services for the elderly, those in need of food assistance and those choosing to receive personal medical care in their own community.

WOEC was able to find a suitable location, purchase property and has already broken ground on their construction projects. The Senior Center, Health Center and Food Bank, all non-profits, have been working through the long process of creating a development plan and identifying suitable locations and funding.

"We have been told by our current service provider that they do not have the capacity to rebuild if we have another flood," says Vernonia Health Board consultant, Heather Lewis. "We need to find a solution to our situation."

Finding that solution has proven to be a challenge-- three years after the Flood of 2007, all three are still sitting in the flood zone, vulnerable to being damaged again.

"All three organizations, if they had the ability to just go down to U.S. Bank or Wauna Federal Credit Union and borrow the money would just do that," says Vernonia's Interim City Administrator, Bill Haack,

who has been working with all three groups since he was brought to town by Columbia County to help with economic recovery in 2008. "Instead, since they need to have the benefit of federal or state funding or private philanthropy, they have to go through the long and drawn-out process of getting in the queue and than successfully managing the process to get those resources. In addition, they each need to figure out how to develop their projects." Haack was named the Interim City Administrator in June of 2010.

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**St. Patrick's Day
Parade!**

March 17th

5:15 PM

**at Pat Knight's House
(across from the school)**



Vernonia Council Votes to Begin Search for City Administrator

At the February 22, 2011 Vernonia City Council meeting, Council, in a split vote, 3-2, voted to begin a search process for City Administrator candidates.

Voting in support of beginning the search process were new Councilors Willow Burch and Marilyn Nicks, along with Councilor Kevin Hudson. Voting to offer the position to current Interim Pro Tem City Administrator, Bill Haack, was new Mayor Josette Mitchell and Councilor Randy Parrow. Burch, Nicks and Mitchell were all elected this past November and took office in January, 2011.

Haack has been serving as Interim Pro Tem since the resignation of previous Administrator Bob Young in June, 2010. Haack has been working under a Professional Services Contract provided by Columbia Pacific Economic Development (ColPac). Council approved an extension of that contract at their January 3, 2011, meeting. That extension is set to expire on June 30, 2011.

Council has been debating what to do about the City Administrator position for the last several weeks in workshops and Council sessions, meeting twice in January and twice in February to specifically discuss the City Administrator position. During those sessions, Council discussed three options: offer the regular City Administrator position to Haack, or begin a search process for new candidates, either by paying the

League of Oregon Cities (LOC) to assist with the process or doing the process themselves. Using the LOC would cost the city \$6,000, along with any other expenses the city might incur to bring candidates to the city for interviews.

After four workshops, Council still has not reached a clear decision about whether they want to hire a full-time City Administrator or whether they think someone can perform the job on a part-time basis.

Haack has offered to work full-time for the next year for \$60,000 plus benefits, which the Council has identified as a reasonable salary to offer to a full time candidate-- a salary they can likely afford for next year. Previous City Administrator Bob Young was paid \$75,000.

Council met again in a workshop prior to the February 22 meeting to discuss their options. At the beginning of the workshop, City Recorder Joann Glass read three letters of support for Haack. The first was a letter from city staff signed by eight employees including Police Chief Michael Conner, City Planner Carole Connell, Finance Officer Angie Handegard, Public Works Foreman Jeff Burch and City Recorder Joann Glass. Letters of support were also read from Librarian Nancy Burch, and from West Oregon Electric Cooperative Director, Marc Farmer.

"We would encourage you all to consider what is currently on the plate of the City and if bringing

in someone new who will have to spend months getting familiar with everything is the best choice for the City and the community," stated the letter from staff.

Mayor Mitchell noted during the discussion that she recently spoke with the Mayor of Shady Cove, a city that is similar in size to Vernonia. "They are going through the same thing right now and they had two candidates, neither one of which they liked," stated Mitchell.

During the workshop, Councilor Burch noted that she has not been happy with the communication from the City Administrator. "The communication level from City Administrator to Council at this point has been poor."

Councilor Parrow advocated for hiring Haack. "We are going to go so far backwards without Bill," said Parrow. "The learning curve is going to be tremendous. We have someone who is willing to put the hours in for less pay and we're sitting here talking about hiring someone half-time. The work is not going to get done."

Councilors Burch, Hudson and Nicks all stated that they felt they needed to trust a search process.

When the official vote was taken during the regular Council meeting, many members of the audience stood and left the Chambers.

Council was scheduled to begin the search process with the assistance of the LOC on March 7th.

inside



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eagle
scout



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taekwon-do
tournament



9
dr. gilmore
retires