

# An Opinion: How Do We Agree To Disagree?

By Scott Laird

A month ago, when the Vernonia City Council voted 3-2 to begin a search for City Administrator candidates instead of offering the position to current Interim Bill Haack, I was... well, extremely disappointed would be one way of saying it. Furious would be another. And I certainly didn't feel any better two weeks later when Council actually started that search, voted to approve spending the \$6,000 associated with the search, and basically ignored the pleading of the members of the community who had packed City Hall asking them to change their minds. And I wasn't the only one who was unhappy.

Since that decision was made, our community has been in turmoil and a line has been drawn in the sand. Which side are you on? was the question of the month. Are you with us or against us? Sides have been taken, battle plans have been drawn up and words like "recall" and "boycott" have been thrown around.

It was a familiar feeling, this "us" versus "them." We know it well here in Vernonia. And many of us had the same thought the day after the March 7<sup>th</sup> City Council meeting, "Here we go again!" Fighting with each other, encouraging conflict and discord, pointing fingers and blaming each other.

And it was at that moment that several people saw what we were doing. Saw the danger in the course we had set for ourselves. Saw the damage we were doing and starting working to change the course of our conversations. Several people, almost simultaneously, asked themselves and each other, "How can we find a way to disagree with each other in a respectful and constructive manner. How can we work through this without tearing ourselves apart? How can we agree to disagree?"

We are obviously not the only ones dealing with this issue. Wisconsin comes to mind and so does Capitol Hill in Washington. Anywhere governments are struggling with difficult decisions and representing constituents, we see the same things— divisiveness, rhetoric, alliances and the choosing of sides.

Except that here, in Vernonia, we should all be on the same side. Here in Vernonia, these are our neighbors and friends we are disagreeing with. We should all be working for Vernonia.

It's time we all take a good, hard look in the mirror, myself included. We are all passionate about what happens to our community. We all care and want what is best. We all have good intentions and believe we are right. We all have worked so hard to recover from 2007 and move forward. And sometimes we let our emotions get the better of us.

But maybe this is an opportunity to harness those emotions and that passion. Maybe this conflict is a chance to make a shift in how we work with each other. Maybe this is a way to get citizens who are energized to become more engaged. Maybe this is a chance to turn talk of recall into talks about mediation. Maybe this is a chance to turn ideas about boycotts into community conversations about solutions.

Which brings us back to the question-- how do we find a way to agree

to disagree over extremely important issues in a way that is respectful, constructive and solution-oriented? How do we find a way to hear different points of view that honors that person's right to have their own opinion? How do we take these emotions and use them as a positive force? How do we come back together and, instead of drawing a line in the sand and choosing sides, draw a circle that contains all of us? How do we agree to disagree but still work together for what is best for our community? Because, quite honestly, we have a lot of work to do.

I am still not happy with the decision City Council made to start the search process. I believe they are making a big mistake and going against the wishes of city staff, other city leaders who are engaged in the work of the community and the city partners in some of the major projects the city is working on. A poll taken two weeks ago of 33 members of the City Planning Commission and City Parks, Public Works, VCLC, Airport and Economic Development Committees was responded to by 21 members: 19 said Council should have hired Haack directly; 2 said they didn't have enough information to weigh in. 0 agreed with our City Councilors in starting a search.

These Councilors have stated their reasons for starting this search publicly, but they also have a responsibility to listen to the majority of citizens they represent who want to see some continuity at City Hall.

I will not stop telling them what I think as they go through the search process for a permanent City Administrator— they represent us and they need to hear what we think. We have so much at stake and the eyes of many important resources are on us. Hopefully, Bill Haack will decide to apply for the job and, hopefully, his experience, qualifications and commitment to Vernonia will be considered fairly.

That is my opinion.

Over the last month, I have talked with many people and listened to their thoughts and ideas. I have heard from people who were angry, confused and dismayed by what is happening in Vernonia. Many courses of action have been discussed and several good thoughts have percolated to the surface. I write these ideas here not just for the rest of the citizens of this community to consider, but also as a reminder to myself.

**Direct Conversations**— We live in a place and time where information spreads by word of mouth and quickly becomes rumor. Emails and social networking don't allow us to read body language and expressions when we communicate with each other and forces us to sometimes assume the tone or meaning behind messages. Messages get mixed and things are written in the heat of the moment and sent out to several, maybe hundreds, of people that cannot be taken back. We need to go back to face-to-face conversations with each other.

**Belief vs. Truth**— Just because we believe something doesn't make it the truth. We need facts. We need honesty. We need information. Let's get all the issues out on the table and really talk about what is driving our decisions. Let's be honest and forthright and find the truth. Our new City Councilors

need to know more before they make major decisions; the rest of us need to know more before we start spouting off about what is wrong or right.

**Don't Make Assumptions**— Information needs to be confirmed by asking directly before it is spread. Let's stop the rumor mill.

**Ask Questions and Listen**— When we are looking for more information, go to informed sources. Ask questions of our leaders and our elected officials. And really listen to the answers. Ask about and listen to the reasons behind the decisions. Ask more questions. Really try to understand what is happening and why.

**Speak Up**— If you don't agree with what is happening, tell someone. Make sure you have all the information and do it in a thoughtful and respectful way. Don't do or say things that you wish you could take back later.

**Look in the Mirror**— Do you really believe what you are saying, or are you just repeating what someone else told you? Do you have the facts to back up what you are saying? Are you being completely honest? Is what you are doing and saying really helping? Will your actions help bring about what is best for Vernonia? Can you agree to disagree?

None of this will be easy. Right now, our community is polarized. People are passionate and fired up. A lot is at stake. But we need to remember that we all want what is best for Vernonia. We may have different approaches and methods. But, in the end, we need each other and we must work together.

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**Publisher and Managing Editor**  
**Scott Laird**  
503-367-0098  
scott@vernoniasvoice.com

**Contributors**

Chip Bubl  
Dr. Carol McIntyre  
Sean Pickner  
Randy Sanders  
Sonia Spackman  
Burt Tschache

**Photography**

Creekside Studios  
Scott Laird  
P&C Construction  
UNWC

**Copy Editor**

Dennis Nicks

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