

# An Opinion: A City Divided

By Scott Laird

The signatures have been gathered (180 in one single day) and the petitions have been filed. The citizens of Vernonia are asking to recall two more of their City Councilors—Willow Burch and Marilyn Nicks.

Both have only been in office for six months. Yet, since taking office both have gone back on statements they made during the election campaign and have pushed personal agendas instead of taking care of the city's business. They have refused to listen to, and angered their constituents. As we go to print, we were waiting to see whether either would choose to voluntarily resign or would force the city to spend funds to go through the process of another recall election. Less than two months ago, Councilor Kevin Hudson held out for an election—he lost by 83% of the vote.

Many people may think that these three recalls are only about the firing of former Interim City Administrator Bill Haack. And it is true, these three Councilor's inability to work with Haack and much of the animosity towards these Councilors does surround the termination of Haack's contract. But it has been much more than that.

Both Burch and Nicks have shown a lack of understanding about how city government functions, a lack of understanding about the role of the City Council in the day-to-day operations of the city, have made rash decisions without considering the full consequences, and have been more concerned about their own personal agenda than they have been in representing the majority.

I don't expect either Burch or Nicks to step down—neither seems willing or able to understand the damage they are causing. I don't expect either to choose to do the right thing.

What I originally intended to publish in this space here was a list of reasons why Burch and Nicks should be recalled. But at the last minute I changed my mind. If you have been reading local news publications for the last few months you know what has transpired. Most of you have probably made up your mind about how you will vote if it comes down to a recall election. Using this space to reiterate, point by point, what I believe Burch and Nicks have done wrong is not necessary.

What is necessary is to talk about the division that is occurring in our community. The last six months have been extremely difficult. The city has suffered through the investigation into a Police Officer, Mike Kay, that has forced citizens and leaders to choose sides. And now three City Councilors have forced citizens to choose sides as well. Ugly words have been spoken and friendships have been ruined. Our community has become divided.

Kay, along with his canine officer Krueger, was a popular officer to many—someone who participated in and organized many community activities. He was also a lightning rod, a police officer who seemed to be a magnet for controversy. When Interim City Administrator Haack became aware, last year, of problems with the contract for Krueger's services between Kay and the City, and then problems with Kay's training documents for Krueger,

he pulled Krueger out of service to protect the city's liability. Haack, new to the job of City Administrator and working with an Interim Police Chief, was unfamiliar with overseeing a Police Force, and asked for assistance from the state Department of Safety Standards and Training (DPSST). The resulting DPSST investigation, as well as a city investigation into Kay, eventually led to Kay's termination on June 27<sup>th</sup>. But not before Haack was ousted on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Councilors Hudson, Burch and Nicks all made Haack the bad guy in the Mike Kay situation. Hudson confronted Haack continually starting last October; Burch and Nicks joined with Hudson when they were elected and took office in January. The three of them banded together to form a majority that voted to start a search process for a new City Administrator, and then to terminate Haack's contract.

The citizens have spoken up during these last six months and made their feelings known. They asked the Councilors to reconsider. They signed petitions, turned out to Council meetings and spoke from the floor. They wrote letters to the local newspapers. And then in June they voted to recall Hudson by a six-to-one margin.

It is dangerous to have elected officials in office who don't know what they are doing. But what is even more dangerous is having elected officials in office who don't know that they don't know what they are doing. And that is what we have had for the last six months. Councilors who question staff decisions and have tried to micromanage the running of day-to-day city operations. Councilors who have continually spoken out-of-turn on numerous occasions, embarrassing themselves and the city and putting the city at legal risk.

I don't have a problem with someone inexperienced holding office. Sometimes new ideas and a new viewpoint is needed. What I have a problem with is inexperienced leaders forcing issues or an agenda.

What I wish had happened in January with this new Council was an agreement to extend Haack's contract for a year. Then they could have set goals for themselves, the City and their staff, and then worked with the staff carry out those goals. They could have talked to the people and found out what they wanted. Dealt together with the big issues in front of them and the City. Gained some understanding about the major projects that were in the works—the wastewater project, the school construction, the Rose Avenue Project. Worked through and found solutions to their differences.

We had a group of inexperienced people, Haack included, who all needed to find a way to work together. Instead we find ourselves divided.

Hudson seemed intent on getting rid of Haack. Hudson is a friend of Kay's and has worked closely with the K9 officer program, even helping raise money to fund it. Nicks and her family are also close to Kay. These Councilors chose Kay over Haack—in the end it turned out that Haack was right and now Kay is gone as well.

The people spoke up and tried to be heard throughout the last six months. After the May 2 City Council meeting,

when Hudson, Burch and Nicks suddenly voted to terminate Haack, citizen Sharon Bernal, approached Councilor Burch on the dais. "We are going to recall you," she told Burch. Burch responded "Go ahead!"

These Councilors has spent money unnecessarily, have wasted time and been indecisive, have been unwilling to compromise, have not fully disclosed their real reasons for decisions, have been mistrusting towards staff, and have been biased when conducting city business. But most of all, they have not listened to the majority of the citizens they represent.

Councilor Hudson was recalled in June. Here was a chance to bring the community back together and heal the divide. Instead, it seemed to make no difference to either Burch or Nicks. They made no concessions nor expressed any doubts about their decisions over the last six months. They have left the citizens no choice. And we will be further divided.

Very soon we will start the process of healing. Of coming back together and listening to each other. Of examining what happened and what lessons we need to learn from all this discord.

I think some of us have already learned one lesson—elected officials need to listen to the people they represent.



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## Vernonia City Council Upcoming Meetings and City Hall Closures

**MEETING PLACE: City Hall**  
**MEETING TIME: 7:00 PM**

**MONDAY, JULY 18, 2011**  
**MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 2011**  
**MONDAY, AUGUST 15, 2011**  
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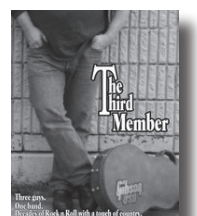
Vernonia's Voice is published twice each  
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Look for our next issue July 26th.



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