

The New WOEC HQ Building: The Complete Story

By Marc Farmer
General Manager, WOEC

West Oregon Electric Cooperative (WOEC) has just completed, dedicated, and relocated to the our new headquarters facility and I thought it would be helpful to provide our members with a comprehensive review on the process from beginning to end so that all members will have the complete story about our new facility.

The process of building a new headquarters facility really started back in 1996 after the first flood event. Our old building, constructed in 1956, was inundated with 3 feet of water. At that time the General Manager, Russell Green, informed the Board that a new building would need to be constructed within the next 10 years. The reasons for the new building then remained true in 2007 as the Board had decided to move forward with the purchase of land to construct a new facility. The reasons included: the old building being in the flood plain, we had outgrown the building, wiring was old and needed to be replaced as it could not handle the power needs of all today's electronics, (we actually had smoke and sparks coming from our electric panel from the overload), our plumbing needed to be replaced, the facility was not energy or space efficient, and another safety issue came from an engineering study that declared the building unsafe from seismic events. The building was not designed back in 1956 to meet seismic codes, and if an event took place this side of Seattle it would bring the building down upon us. This was only added to by the almost 4 feet of water in the 2007

flood.

In the month prior to the December 3rd flood of 2007, the Co-op had put down escrow funds to purchase 7 acres on Mist Drive. When looking at the property immediately after the flood, it was plainly clear that we should not proceed with the purchase as the front half of the property was flooded. We would have moved from one flood plain to another, and so we made the wise choice to not proceed with that purchase. The decision was made to conduct three separate searches for the location of the new facility. I conducted the first search with the help of Vernonia Realty. The second study was done by Steele and Associates from Bend, and the third by a certified commercial realtor from Portland. Each independent study came up with the same conclusion that the best location for the new facility was the Gordon Smith property on the corner of Rose Avenue and Maple Street.

To make sure the construction of a new facility met with the approval of the membership of the Co-op, a member survey was conducted. The response was not only statistically valid in the number of members responding, 12%, it was also very evenly balanced from each of the seven Board Districts. The message was clear from those responding as 81% responded that they would be willing to pay \$3 or less per month for a new headquarters facility. This strengthened the resolve to proceed to build.

The first question people ask is why we did not use the property the Co-op owns where the pole yard is currently located. This property was included in each of the three searches

but was determined to not be practical for three major reasons: the first being that the access road to the property was completely impassable during flood events making it impossible to get to or from the building. To build an access road out of the flood plain to the property would have cost over \$1 million. This brings us to the second major reason that because the property was out of the city limits, there were no sewer, water, and telephone facilities to the site. Adding the extension costs of these to the road access meant that even before we began any site prep work for construction we would have to spend almost \$2 million just to have proper infrastructure in place. It was significantly cheaper to purchase property with the infrastructure already available.

The downturn in the economy then came upon us and the Board of Directors decided that now was not the time to begin construction of a new facility. About 6 weeks after this decision, West Oregon was notified by FEMA, Oregon Emergency Management, and the City of Vernonia that this was not an option. As an essential service with more than 80% damage to our facility, we had to relocate within three years or jeopardize receiving future FEMA funding for future flood events if we chose to purposely remain in an identified flood plain. The Board had no choice but to proceed with the purchase

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