

What it Takes to Build A School – Part I

By Dr. Ken Cox
Superintendent Vernonia School District

When it all started it all seemed so simple; we were going to build a school. What I have learned since those naïve days is that this is a far more complex endeavor than I ever imagined.

As I think back I can see that there has been three distinct phases to the project: determining the best site, the whole FEMA-NEPA process of identifying and then meeting federal program guidelines, and then finally construction. However, the construction has many parts as well: the wetlands on the site, the utility and street changes on both Missouri Ave and Bridge St, the building construction itself, the future demolition of our existing schools, and finally the construction of the replacement Spencer Park.

What I would like to do is give you a breakdown of each of the different projects and how we are progressing on them. In this article I will touch on what has been done and in process. In Part II I will talk about what is to come: the demolition, park construction, future community involvement, and the overall budget.

Wetlands Mitigation

When we first identified the site, the first order of business was to purchase enough land to go with Spencer Park to build a school. We ended up purchasing five pieces of property from four different owners. Once the property was secured the biggest challenge was the nearly four acres of wetlands. By law we must mitigate, or replace, these wetlands with twice as much comparable wetlands. We looked at two different sites for these mitigated wetlands: one in Vernonia and the other a stream restoration along a nearby creek. After many discussions we determined that it would be best to go with the wetlands in Vernonia and we worked with the City of Vernonia to

create the wetlands that are now fenced in orange about a quarter mile west of Vernonia Lake. This seven acre parcel has been designed and created so that it will collect water and maintain enough moisture to maintain native plant species. In fact, the site will be monitored for the next five years to make sure that the plants have survived under typical weather conditions.

As we began the wetlands construction we have continually looked for ways to provide for collaboration between the different aspects of the entire project and the community. Some examples of this are our forestry class which will assist the landscaper in some of the planting in the spring, both at the new school site and at the wetlands. In addition, we will work with the City to amend our Intergovernmental Agreement to allow our students to maintain the wetlands rather than pay the City to do so. And another aspect of collaboration is that the wetlands will be used as a hands-on part of our natural resources curriculum, as we will eventually have learning stations placed around the entire wetlands. The wetlands will also be included as an integral part of the City's overall park design for all of the property between Vernonia Lake and the new Spencer Park (where the schools are now).

Initially we budgeted \$300,000 for the wetlands development. In June of 2011, we decided to increase the budget to \$500,000 based on the information we had at the time. We then published a Request for Proposals (RFP) and out of over 20 companies who showed interest we selected the lowest bidder at \$875,000. We believe the increase was due at least in part to the uncertainty on the number of concrete foundations that were buried in the underbrush on the site. We continue to work with the landscape contractor on this project to find ways to reduce this total cost. One way is to use natural plant species that Mr.

Miller can get from the Bureau of Land Management at no cost and the other is to have students help with the planting in the spring.

Off-Site Construction (Missouri Ave. and Bridge St.)

I remember sitting in a meeting at the ODOT Offices in Portland when they told us that their initial estimate to widen Bridge Street at the new site was \$6,000,000. I didn't want to believe them especially since we had only budgeted \$3,300,000 for all the work necessary on both Missouri Avenue and Bridge Street. We were all very pleased to hear Governor Kulongoski at the groundbreaking in December of 2010, announce that the state would provide \$3,800,000 for the project. Because the ODOT funding could not be used for utilities, we began a separate project to deal with the off-site utilities. We have worked with the Planning Commission and WOEC to move the electric lines from underground to overhead in order to save over \$80,000 on the project. At ODOT's request, rather than going straight down Missouri to Bridge and then east along Bridge, we had the sewer lines go east along Alabama (before they got to Bridge) and then along the St. Mary's property down the gulley to go under Bridge Street. We also published an RFP for the sewer and storm water run-off from the site south along Missouri. This work has met numerous challenges: the first was there was solid rock in part of the excavation. Then we found that the existing sewer line beneath Bridge St. was not adequate to handle the new school's needs and so we are having to bore underneath the highway to install a bigger line down to the pump station.

On the budget side, once ODOT became part of the project we no longer had to worry about the street improvements. But, we still needed to deal with the underground utilities. The original bid award for the storm water/sewer RFP was \$275,000, but due to issues, including the extensive sewer line extension I described above, that cost is currently estimated at \$400,000.

Building Construction

When we began looking for a contractor to build our schools we chose to use a construction model known as CMGC, which stands for Construction Manager General Contractor. The basic premise of this construction model is that we hire a contractor early on, who then works with the architects through-

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Project Budget by Category

CONSTRUCTION TOTAL	\$30,000,000
DESIGN/PERMITTING	\$4,200,000
PROJECT MANAGEMENT	\$800,000
ENVIRONMENTAL TESTING/ MITIGATION/PERMITTING	\$1,600,000
REAL PROPERTY	\$1,600,000
MISCELLANEOUS COSTS	\$300,000
FUNDRAISING/FINANCING COSTS	\$1,000,000
CONTINGENCY	\$500,000
PROJECT TOTAL COST	\$40,000,000

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