

# An Opinion: What a Difference a Year Makes

By Scott Laird

A little over a year ago the Vernonia City Council welcomed three new members when Bruce McNair, Kim Tierney and Donna Webb were sworn into office on August 29, 2011. One week later the new Council met on September 6th and voted to rehire Bill Haack as City Administrator, bringing an end to tumultuous year of politics in Vernonia.

The past year, since the new Council took office and Haack returned, has been relatively quiet, at least as far as any major controversy goes. Of course, after a year which saw the firing of Haack, the recall of the three City Councilors who voted to fire him, the selection of three new Councilors and then the rehiring of Haack, any year would appear to be quiet.

But it has not been a quiet year as far the work load goes for Haack, the City Council and city staff. One year later, the City of Vernonia is steadily moving forward on many large scale projects, thanks in large part to the guidance of Haack and a Council that has put a lot of effort into their volunteer job.

The new Council seems to be working fairly well together under the leadership of Mayor Josette Mitchell. They have had their moments when they have disagreed or dragged out discussions, but they have definitely been willing to invest an immense amount of time, meeting almost weekly and often twice in a week in regular meetings and in workshops designed to give them the opportunity to educate themselves about the issues. The work load they have created for themselves has been daunting, yet they have continued to plow ahead and are accomplishing much. Three of the Council positions are open for election this fall and Mayor Mitchell and Councilors Randy Parrow and Kim Tierney have submitted themselves for re-election. All are running unopposed.

The Council is doing good work. This new version of the Council has remained focused and has been able to work through their differences for the most part, continuing to do the work of the city.

That work has moved forward, in a large part thanks to Haack and the staff at City Hall, along with the volunteers on the many City Committees. The Planning Commission and City Planner Carole Connell have been working on several large scale endeavors including

parking issues and a huge rezoning project that includes approximately 130 parcels of property within city limits. The Public Works Committee has been especially busy with a water rate study that led to a change in how the City charges for water consumption and of course, the wastewater facilities update project—a major undertaking for the city.

All of these projects have been fairly visible to the public. But behind the scenes Haack has been even busier. At the recent City Council meetings, Haack has provided written update reports to Council about some of the projects he and his staff are currently involved in. The following is an abbreviated review of just some of those projects:

**FEMA NFIP**--The City is grappling with how to manage National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) compliance requirements. This is a major problem for the city as many houses in the flood zone are not in compliance which could affect the ability of all property owners to receive flood insurance through the national program.

**CDGB Open Space**--The City is now the owner of over 40 properties, which have been acquired through FEMA buy-outs. The City needs to manage these properties based on usage requirements and must develop a policy as well as a financial structure to do this.

**Economic Opportunity Analysis**--The previously mentioned rezoning is part of an update to the City Comprehensive Plan, which has not been updated since 1996. Any update requires an Economic Opportunity Analysis (EOA) report; City Planner Connell presented a 34 page draft of the report to Council on September 17<sup>th</sup>.

**The Vernonia Schools Project**--The City has been involved in the ODOT road improvements along Bridge Street and Missouri Avenue, the demolition of the old school building site, the move of the school administration building to a new site and the wetland mitigation project which sits on city property.

**Master Capital Plan Update**--The City is moving forward with an update to the current Master Capital Plan which has not been done in over ten years. A draft of the update is expected in November.

**Leak Detection**--The City Engineer and Public Works crew has been working with an outside company to locate and begin repairs to what is believed to be a 35% loss within the city water distribution system.

**Changes in Public Works**--Haack has had to make personnel changes in the Public Works Department due to cuts that Council approved in this years' budget.

**Changes at the City Library**--Hack has had to find a replacement for long time City Librarian Nancy Burch who has voluntarily elected to move into retirement.

**Other Changes to Staff**--The City has replaced long time Park Host Bill Yeo, who retired this year due to illness. The City also found a new Park Host for Anderson Park and has also had to fill the position of Building and Grounds Maintenance. Long time Cemetery Caretaker Synda Allen also retired this year.

**Medical Services**--Haack has been closely involved with the Vernonia Health Center Board in their attempts to provide medical clinic services for the community.

**EPA Brownfields**--Haack reports that he has submitted a work plan that will be part of an agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to begin the process of using EPA funds to identify Brownfield sites for cleanup in Vernonia.

**Bear Creek Flooding**--Haack reports he is investigating a land management issue with properties around Bear Creek that have seasonal flooding issues.

As you can see, Haack and the staff at City Hall have been busy. And this list is just projects that currently are active and doesn't include the Rose Avenue Project, a major Park plan for the

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