

State of the City

A Conversation with Vernonia Mayor Josette Mitchell

Josette Mitchell was elected Mayor of Vernonia and took office in January of 2011. She was re-elected in 2013 after running unopposed. At the age of 35 she is one of the youngest Mayors in the state of Oregon. In December of 2013, following the dismissal of City Administrator Bill Haack, Mitchell assumed the role of temporary City Administrator, a role she filled once before when Haack was fired in 2011 before he was re-hired several months later.

Vernonia's Voice decided to check in with Mayor Mitchell about the most recent shake up at Vernonia City Hall and get her perspective on what's happening in Vernonia as we start a new year.



1. How is the City doing financially this fiscal year? Are there any major deviations from the adopted budget?

In regards to the City budget, it is another tight year. The economy has not yet rebounded, we have quite a few foreclosed and bank owned properties in town and that equates to a lower amount of property tax income. Property tax income is the primary source of revenue that makes up the General Fund for the City. The County informed us that there would be a \$90,000 reduction in property tax revenue coming to the City from what was forecasted. Fortunately, the City Budget Committee had decided last year to budget \$50,000 below the forecast, so the City's real reduction in funds was \$40,000 less than we expected, troublesome but not as devastating as it could have been. We would have potentially had to reduce staff had we not made that decision to budget less than forecasted.

As far as deviations from the adopted budget; since we have had changes in staff, along with that comes payouts on banked vacation time, etc. All still within the budget, however some of the money that we would have used to pay payroll may be reduced, limiting the options

for replacing said staff.

The City Council and staff are focused on providing the essential services the community deserves while maintaining the cost effective strategies we need to follow to be financially prudent. I think this next budget cycle will be difficult, hard choices will have to be made. Funds will have to support themselves or make cuts. The involvement of the community will be vital as the Budget Committee discusses and makes these decisions.

2. Is the new Health Center still on track to begin construction this spring?

The Council recently had an update from the Health Board members regarding their project. We were told they plan to break ground in February. The City Council and Health Board are currently working together to draw up a 50 year lease agreement for the City land the new Health Center will be built upon. The process has been longer than we all would like, however it is important to acknowledge that this lease will need to layout all potential issues that may come up

continued on page 19

School District Receives State Grant for Career and Technical Education

The Oregon Department of Education and Bureau of Labor and Industries jointly announced this week that the Vernonia School District has been awarded a \$250,000 grant for Career and Technical Education (CTE) Revitalization. Funds from this highly competitive grant will be used to enlarge and finalize the school's current shop facilities, providing space for construction and metals classes, as well as expand the school's current CTE course offerings.

"The district is both very pleased and highly honored to have been awarded this grant by the Department of Education," said district superintendent Dr. Kenneth Cox. "It is our firm belief that our students have to graduate high school prepared for their next step in life, and this expansion of our program will better enable those wishing to embark on a wider array of career options."

Funds from the Department of Education will also provide planning time for staff to expand existing CTE programs in both Construction and Digital Arts, and enable the district to add new programs in both Engineering and Forestry/Natural Resources. The grant will also enhance the current natural resource curriculum and provide at least six summer

internships for Vernonia High School students, both on site and in association with local agency partnerships.

Two summer internships will be available for Vernonia High School students through Stub Stewart State Park, two with the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council, and two will work with the Vernonia School District. These internships will be designed to increase local job opportunities and career training for students and provide much needed human resources for local partners.

"These programs and internships are key additions to the District's overall effort to work with local business partners," stated Aaron Miller, principal of Vernonia Elementary School and manager of the school district's natural resources and sustainability programs. "We are grateful for this new and much-needed investment to provide a well-rounded menu of academic programs that allow our students to develop the skills they will need to prepare for their future in college, trade school and the work force."

This is one of 24 CTE grants recently announced which total \$8.87 million. Additional information can be found at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=4050>

inside

6 voices from the crowd

10 new 4wd ambulance

11 vhs winter sports

13 vhs hall of fame



Older Vernonia Grads Are Giving Back

Many Vernonia Alumni are still connected to their former community, particularly their old school and now the new school.

Jim and Kathy Eckland started The Vernonia Alumni Sports Initiative in October, 2012, to raise funds for the completion of athletic fields and facilities at the new schools. According to Jim Eckland, during the past 15 months over \$50,000 has been contributed by 130 Alumni, in amounts ranging from \$20 to \$10,000.

In addition, members of the Class of 1973 organized the "Give Back Bash" in early August and donated over \$10,000 to the fund. An additional \$4,000 was contributed through the Gary Davis Memorial last winter.

With almost \$65,000 raised in just over a year, the Vernonia Education Foundation now has enough money set aside to begin work on a softball field at the new



The VHS Class of 1973 raised over \$10,000 at the Give Back Bash and donated it towards the Alumni Sports Initiative.

school campus later this spring.

Significantly, most of the \$50,000 the Ecklands have raised through the Alumni Sports Initiative has come through the hard work and generosity of past graduates. Even more significantly, 98% of those funds were contributed by Alumni who graduated prior to 1975.

Every summer, on the third

Sunday of August, over 100 former Vernonia High School grads from the 1940s through the 1960s return to Vernonia and gather at Anderson Park to meet classmates and relive old memories. Many of these same Vernonia Alumni have contributed monetarily to the new schools, some during the construction phase and

continued on page 10