

An Opinion: Council Needs to Finalize Lease With Health Board

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia City Council and the Vernonia Health Board have been working to negotiate a lease agreement for property the City controls, so the Health Board can begin construction of the new health clinic facility. The Health Board had hoped to break ground on their new facility in early February, but after the last City Council meeting on February 18, there was still no agreement on the use of the property, and so, construction has been unable to proceed.

Both groups have been working hard over the last several months to find common ground and iron out the details of what will be a fifty year agreement. The two sides have discussed potential uses, length of the lease, what happens if the lease ends suddenly and other, often sticky points. One by one they have reached agreement on almost every point, although the discussions have often become somewhat contentious and personalities seem to be getting in the way.

One item the two sides haven't agreed on yet is rent for the property, although the Health Board maintains they had an agreement for \$1 per year. This was a point of discussion by both the members of the Health Board during "Topics From the Floor" and by Council during the City Administrator Report at the February 18 meeting.

The City received the parcel of land between Rose and Weed Avenues from the State of Oregon Parks and

Recreation Department (OPRD) at no cost, in exchange for an agreement that the City maintain the paved trail that connects the Banks-Vernonia Trailhead to Vernonia Lake. That trail, called Webb Way, was already owned by the City; the deal with OPRD requires that the City keep and maintain the trail. In exchange the City received a much needed location, out of the Flood Zone, where they could house social services that needed to be moved-the Food Bank, Senior Center and Health Clinic. It was a great deal for the City.

The Vernonia Health Board organized themselves quickly when the opportunity to relocate out of the flood zone presented itself. They developed a construction plan, navigated through FEMA regulations, approached several high profile Foundations, and put together over \$1 million in funding in an unbelievably short period of time, doing what many said was impossible. They had hoped to break ground in early February but have now been bogged down in negotiations for what has turned into several months. According to members of the Health Board, some of their funding could be in jeopardy if the project doesn't get started soon.

The Vernonia Health Board has served this community faithfully for many years. They have owned the building where several health care providers have operated, furnishing local health care for the community and making available a needed service. They have most recently developed partnerships with the Public Health

Foundation of Columbia County and Pacific University to create a new model for delivering rural health care.

The City Council has continually maintained throughout the lease negotiations that they are only doing their job and looking out for the best interests of the citizens they represent. A long term lease is tricky and all possibilities need to be considered, which can be difficult when trying to project out into the future. Unfortunately, time constraints, as the Health Board tries to make use of disappearing FEMA funds, has made negotiations feel pressured and rushed.

The Council has met several times in special meeting to discuss details of the lease, so it is not as if the Council is ignoring the issue. They have given ground on several key issues, so they have shown they are willing to negotiate. They have engaged and involved their legal representative and spent funds on legal fees, so it is obvious they want the project to happen. The process just seems to be taking too long.

The Health Board has been innovative, creative, diligent and determined as they have waded through a complicated planning and fundraising process. They have overcome many obstacles and refused to give up, all for the good of the citizens of this community. What we need now is for City Council and the Health Board to put their differences aside, iron out the final details, sign a lease agreement and move forward.



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One year subscriptions
(24 issues) \$35

Vernonia's Voice is published on the 1st and 3rd Thursday of each month.

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Vernonia, OR 97064
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Another Opinion: Oregonian Article Not Fair to Vernonia Schools

By Scott Laird

A recent five-part series of articles in The Oregonian, written by Betsy Hammond, featured the Vernonia School District in Part 3. That particular article has caused quite a stir around our town. Hammond's series, titled "Empty Desks" looked at attendance issues through out the state of Oregon and was especially critical of the Vernonia School District administration, staff and parents.

Although the article was somewhat of a black eye for the community, it was also somewhat inaccurate in its portrayal of the Vernonia School District (VSD) and their concern about the issue. The article ignored key factors that have led to poor attendance and brushed aside current efforts being made by the VSD to address the issue.

The article featuring Vernonia was a main topic of discussion at the February 13 Vernonia School Board

meeting, as audience member Amy Ceiloha, who, she says was unfairly quoted in the article, asked if the School District would have a response to the article. Superintendent Ken Cox said there would not be any official response, but was happy to discuss the issue, as was Elementary School Principal Aaron Miller, School Board Chair Bill Langmaid and other School Board members, most notably, Ernie Smith. High School Principal Nate Underwood was not in attendance.

It is obvious that the VSD is aware they have an attendance problem, even though early in the Oregonian article it was inferred that the District was oblivious to the issue. Superintendent Cox did refer to a previous Oregonian article from two years ago which identified the VSD as the second worst district in the state, behind Banks, for absenteeism.

In response to an observed problem, the VSD has instituted a new attendance policy this year which requires staff to contact parents when students have

missed 4 days, 8 days and 12 days. Students are considered chronically absent when they miss more than 10% of school days, and the new "call policy" seems to be having a significant impact. Elementary Principal Miller reported that attendance in kindergarten and first grade has increased from 84% last year to 92% in the first half of this year. Chronic absenteeism has dropped from 49% to 27%.

School Board member Smith pointed out that analyzing statistics is a tricky business and that you can manipulate them in numerous ways to reach almost any conclusion you wish. Cox noted that the exact figures the Oregonian referenced were actually not available to the School District from the state, but were in fact numbers the Oregonian created themselves based on data they collected and collated. As Smith and Miller pointed out, with such a small base of students,

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