

City Gains Data Through Water Service and Billing Project

By Scott Laird

At the February 2, 2015 Vernonia City Council meeting, Council was presented with a report that updated the Water Service and Billing Project. The report was provided by GIS Consultant Ben Fousek, and is the result of months of work by City Public Works staff and community volunteers. The project will provide the City with data that can be used to accurately standardize water and sewer billing. It has also identified potential lost revenue and will provide information that will allow City decision makers to better understand revenue sources for setting future rates.

"The data we've collected will help ensure that all utility customers in the city system will be paying their fair share," said Fousek in an interview following the presentation of the report.

The project included an inventory and documentation of all water services in the city system, what the City has termed "ground truthing." It also included the installation of a new billing system that allows the City to retain history about customer's accounts and produce reports that will better inform decisions about rates.

The City has been attempting to reorganize the water and sewer billing system for several years. During the process, which included analysis and recommendations from the Public Works Committee, numerous discrepancies, concerns and questions arose.

According to Mayor Josette Mitchell the City switched from a flat rate charge for water to a meter multiplier and usage based system about a year and a half ago. "When

we switched we discovered we didn't know the size of everyone's meter. The old billing system we were using didn't contain all that information," explains Mitchell. "We found out

Current city utility bills indicate a water rate with an associated meter size; most residential accounts have either a 3/4 or 5/8 inch meter. Commercial customers can have any-



Map courtesy of Ben Fousek, City of Vernonia GIS.

many of our customers were not being appropriately charged."

In April of 2014 the City switched from the old proprietary system to the newer, more robust water billing system. They also decided to complete an inventory of all water services.

The new billing software, purchased through MuniBilling, is a cloud based platform that provides efficient operations. The switch to the new billing system was not as smooth as was expected due to the quality of data extracted from the old system, prompting the need for the inventory of the entire system to provide accurate data for each account.

where from a 1 to 4 inch meter. Based on meter size, a multiplier is used to achieve a base rate for each customer. Customers receive an allowance for water use; residential customers receive 2,000 gallons; commercial customers receive more based on meter size. Once a customer has used their allowance they begin being charged per thousand gallons used. The utility bill shows each customer's usage. This new usage based system rewards customers who conserve water and charges more to those who make more use of the city system.

The new bill also contains line items for a previous Water Loan, Sewer Usage, a previous Sewer Loan

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Local Board Positions Up for Election

Several positions on the Vernonia School Board, the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors, the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors and the Columbia 9-1-1 Communications District Board of Directors will be up for election on May 19, 2015.

On the Vernonia School Board positions 2 (held by Greg Kintz), 3 (held by Tim Bamburg) and 7 (held by Board Chair Bill Langmaid) will all be open for election. These are all four year positions. Langmaid has declared he will not seek re-election.

On the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors positions 2 (held by Joel Glass), 3 (held by Don Schulte), and 4 (held by Terry Lindauer) are all up for election. All are four year positions. Lindauer has indicated he plans to run for re-election.

On the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors positions 1 (held by Larry Boxman), 2 (held by Joanie Jones), and 4 (held by Barbara Smith) are up for election. Positions 1 and 2 are four year terms; position 4 is a two year term.

At the Columbia 9-1-1 Communications District Zone 1 (Clatskanie, held by Dee Wooley), Zone 2 (which is vacant) and Zone 4 (Vernonia, held by Kathy Denckla) are all up for election.

Each candidate for an office listed above must file a declaration of candidacy accompanied by a filing fee of \$10.00 or a petition for nomination signed by at least 25 registered voters residing in the election district for the office, with the Elections Department of Columbia County by no later than 5:00 PM on March 19, 2015.

Filing forms are available on-line at the Secretary of State, Elections Division <http://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Pages/electionforms.aspx>. The forms are also available at Columbia County Elections Dept., 230 Strand St., St. Helens, OR.

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Senior Center Makes Moves

Members of the Vernonia Senior Center have begun vacating their building at 446 Bridge Street in preparation for the demolition of the facility in March.

The Senior Center Board has secured a lease with the City of Vernonia for use of the Vernonia Community Learning Center at 939 Bridge Street. The Seniors have begun moving their thrift store operation to the new location and will set it up in the front room. They will also have office space at their new location.

At the Senior Center Board meeting on Friday, February 13, the seniors voted 7-5 to reject an offer from Grace Family Fellowship church to use part of their expanded facility to prepare and serve meals and hold social events. The Senior Center would only have been responsible for paying utilities at Grace

Family Fellowship.

"The Grace Family Fellowship elder board has been exceptionally supportive of the seniors and has seen the value of the meal program to this community," said Senior Center Board Secretary Sandy Welch.

Instead the Senior Board voted to purchase the main components of meals from the St. Helens Senior Center at a cost of \$4 per meal. The Seniors said they plan to heat and serve the meals in the back room of their new location at the Learning Center.

Senior Center Board members expressed that the reason for their decision to purchase and reheat meals was in order to save money. At the February 13 Board meeting, it was noted that while sales revenue from the thrift store have recently been on the rise, the center continues to lose money on their meals pro-

gram, which cost them over \$8 each to provide.

"The Senior Board is seeking alternatives to reduce costs while maintaining both the home delivered meals and the congregate meals," said Welch.

The FEMA buyout for the current Senior Center is expected to net the Senior Center \$166,000 after the cost of demolition is deducted.

Those funds will be used for continuing operations and also saved to be used towards construction of a brand new Senior Center facility. The Senior Center Board is working with Community Action Team to secure grant funding for the proposed \$2 million new facility that would be part of the Rose Avenue Project and would also house the Vernonia Cares Food Bank.