

# Vernonia's Determined Recovery Winds Down

By Scott Laird

Any Vernonia resident who was here on December 3, 2007 and experienced the flood will most likely never forget that day, although many of us would like to.

Several recent events, one at a Vernonia City Council meeting, one at the Vernonia Schools campus, and one all the way in Klamath Falls, were a reminder of just how far this community has come since that bleak December day over seven years ago. These events were an indicator that the community may finally be ready to put the flood and the recovery behind us and move ahead.

I remember in the early weeks of the recovery effort, Jim Tierney of Community Action Team, a key organizer of not just the initial recovery activities but the entire long term effort, telling me that the recovery of the community would not be complete for several years, maybe as many as five years. I couldn't believe it... that our community would still be struggling several years later through the turmoil and strife we were experiencing right then.

But here we are, almost eight years later and the recovery effort is finally winding down. We just saw the final building of the FEMA buyouts, the Vernonia Senior Center, demolished.

Tierney attended the Vernonia City Council meeting on April 20 to provide a report on the over-all flood recovery effort in Vernonia and Columbia County. Tierney gave a breakdown of the over \$47 million dollars in funding and services that was funneled into the community.

Included in that sum was over \$37 million in FEMA and other government funds that went towards assisting 109 homes and several other essential service projects, including \$16 million for the school buyout. Homes and businesses were either raised, floodproofed, or purchased and demolished, permanently protecting or moving them above or out of the flood zone. That \$47 million sum also included almost \$6.5 million in loans, \$2.5 million in faith based group labor that assisted with renovations and repairs, as well as \$1 million in flood insurance payments, donations from foundations and corporations, and volunteer labor.

As Tierney pointed out in his report to City Council, that in addition to the funding, loans and volunteer labor, a key component of the recovery effort was the volunteers who immediately

stepped up the day following the flood to begin gathering data and information from property owners who had been effected.

After the flood in 1996 only a handful of homes received assistance and were raised or bought out. In 2007, organizers were determined to assist more members of the community. By immediately gathering information from effected families, flood relief workers were able to stay in contact and assist community members throughout the process of applying for and receiving funds to make repairs, raise their homes or move. They used the data to put pressure on government agencies, to show the need for relief funding, and rally political champions to the cause of rebuilding Vernonia.

And it worked. Vernonia became a cause and received the ongoing attention and assistance of governors, state agencies, local legislators, business leaders and regular citizens, leading to a recovery effort that is now used as an example by FEMA and others around the world.

One of the largest projects to come out of the flood recovery effort was obviously the construction of the new school campus. On May 9 the Vernonia School District celebrated a landmark and the attainment of a long time goal, when they unveiled two plaques designating the school campus facility as LEED Platinum and Green Globe certified.

The Vernonia Schools campus is the first and only K-12 school in the nation to receive LEED Platinum status. The LEED green building rating system is the recognized standard for measuring building sustainability around the world and was a goal of the school construction project from the very beginning. The Green Globe designation was icing on the cake for a project that was determined to set itself apart and be an indicator of a paradigm shift in the Vernonia community.

The new school campus, a model for rural sustainability, as well as the school's commitment to a natural resource based education, is another indicator that the community is moving forward. The Vernonia School Board committed to that vision of rural sustainability when they embraced the plan to construct a LEED Platinum worthy facility, and remained determined to see that vision through to the end of the project. The ceremony on May 9 was an indicator that the community had

achieved another goal on its way to recovery.

To complete this recovery tale, Vernonia even has a piece of orchestral music composed in its honor. Nate McCroskey-Izzett, began composing a piece of music three years ago while still a student in Vernonia. McCroskey-Izzett is now a senior at Mazama High School, and has completed *Vernonia Overture* for his senior project. The instrumental piece is dedicated to the Vernonia community and McCroskey-Izzett's fellow Vernonia classmates, and expresses the beauty of the region, the devastation and grief experienced by the residents from the flood, and the resiliency of the community as they rebuilt the town and constructed the new school building.

McCroskey-Izzett is the son of former Vernonia band instructor Rob Izzett, and conducted the Klamath Falls Community Band as they performed his piece for the first time ever in early April.

I'd like to think that having a piece of music composed and performed about this flood event might be one of the final pieces to our recovery effort.

This community has shown resiliency and determination at every turn as they fought to save the town, rebuild the school, and continue to move forward. There have been many heroic efforts both large and small along the way.

The City traded their sports fields to the School District for construction of the new campus and then had to wait several years for the demolition of the old school and construction of the new fields. Citizens took it upon themselves to construct new baseball fields just south of town on a weed strewn patch of property so local kids would have a place to play.

The Vernonia Health Center took the funds from their FEMA buyout and used it to jump start a million dollar private fundraising campaign to build a new health care facility out of the flood zone.

When the Senior Center facility was torn down last month, one of the final pieces in the recovery effort, the seniors were resourceful and found ways to continue providing services to their client base.

The list goes on and on. While the new Senior Center facility still needs to be built, it would be hard to bet against that eventuality in this town so full of determined and resolute citizens.

VERNONIA'S  
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reflecting the spirit of our community  
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