

# An Opinion: It's Time to Decide

By Scott Laird

In the last issue of *Vernonia's Voice* (February 18, 2016) on page 15, Vernonia Fire Chief Dean Smith explained a concerning situation at the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD).

Smith explained that, due to a shortage of volunteers, he and his department are having difficulty responding to calls and providing adequate coverage in a manner that is safe. The demand to meet expanding state training requirements, along with the everyday personal demands of family and work have left his department short handed and burned out. New volunteers are not stepping up and the current roster is down to less than a dozen. Smith says that if current conditions persist, there will be times when there is no one to respond when you call in with an emergency. I'm paraphrasing here, but that's it in a nutshell.

Smith, the only paid responder on the department, has been telling the community about this concern for

several years now. Usually not one to complain, but rather one who rolls up his sleeves and gets to work creating a solution, last year Smith offered a well thought out fix, a fix that apparently fell on deaf ears.

Last May the VRFPD placed two initiatives on the election ballot. Voters approved a measure to purchase a new fire engine and help modernize the department's fleet. They rejected a levy, by an overwhelming 59-41% margin, that would have been used to hire a single additional paid staff member who would serve as a training officer to assist volunteers meet their training requirements, could also respond to emergency calls, and also manage cadets in training who could be brought in to serve as volunteers.

In his February 18 appeal to the community, Smith is once again proposing the District hire an additional paid staff member, who could help shoulder the burden and relieve some of the pressure the volunteer shortage currently puts on department members.

This community is lucky to

have a chief like Dean Smith, who is hard working, caring and professional. He continues to creatively make the most with what he has, works to build the esteem and morale of his volunteers, keeps his aging rigs on the road and functional, and continues to respond to calls for emergencies whenever they come in. But there is only so much he can do.

While our community doesn't often have a need for a full fire or rescue response, there are occasions when it's needed, and it's comforting to know there are well trained and dedicated department members ready to drop everything at a moment's notice to show up and help.

Our community, and each of us individually, needs to take a hard look at how we support our local fire and rescue personnel, and then we each need to make a decision. We either need to step up and volunteer, agree to pay more and fund another staff position, or decide that emergency services are not that important and start doing without. The decision is yours.

# Salem Update: Increasing the Minimum Wage

By State Representative Brad Witt



There are a lot of big issues pushing through the Legislature right now, and one of them is SB 1532A, the bill that would

raise the minimum wage in Oregon. We received well over 250 emails in our office, from all over the state, just about equally split for and against. The bill came up for a vote in the House last week, and it passed by a slim margin, 32-26, after more than 4 hours of debate and parliamentary procedures. It had already passed the Senate, so by the time you read this, it may have been signed by the Governor. I supported the bill and since some of you contacted me about this issue, I wanted to take the time to give you some background and explain why I voted yes.

First of all, I think it's important to know that 67% of all working Oregonians already make between \$13.50 and \$15.00 per hour. That leaves 28% who make less than \$13.50, and 5%, or over 100,000 Oregonians, who work at minimum wage. The debate

on the floor seemed to center on this lowest tier of workers and whether or not they are entitled to a raise based on their age (teenagers), or experience (1st time workers). And then there are the constraints of a particular industry – will agricultural products in Oregon become so expensive that they will be unable to compete in the global market place? These are all important questions from an employer's standpoint.

Taking some of these concerns into consideration, SB 1532A does not take a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather divides the state into three tiers based on differences in cost of living. The Portland Metro area receives the highest increase, topping out at \$14.75 per hour in 2023. Columbia County and parts of Washington County, as well as other "suburban" areas including the Coast, top out at \$13.50 per hour, and "nonurban" counties, those in eastern and southern Oregon, top out at \$12.50 per hour. All of these areas will see their first increases in July 2016, with District 31 beginning at \$9.75 per hour. Fifty cents an hour may not seem like a lot, but that's about \$80 more per month that will help those who are just scraping by.

Even though SB 1532A has

pretty much made it through the process, please stay tuned! There is a group of moderate, bipartisan legislators representing mostly rural districts, who have been working behind the scenes to craft another minimum wage bill that they feel will be more representative of their districts and take into consideration concerns expressed by small businesses and agricultural interests. I am waiting to see what the final product is before I agree to support it.

Another bill of some importance to District 31 is SB 1517A. Although at the outset it deals with Tillamook County, the impact of this bill to a district like ours with numerous wetlands along creeks and rivers, as well as those contained within land zoned Exclusive Farm Use (EFU), could be both significant and beneficial. Under current law, the creation, restoration or enhancement of a wetland is an allowable use on EFU land, but the lack of county authority to review wetland projects and assess impacts to neighboring properties was a source of frustration to many.

Anyone working the land understands the importance of wetlands in maintaining a healthy ecosystem,

VERNONIA'S  
*voice*  
reflecting the spirit of our community

**Publisher and Managing Editor**  
**Scott Laird**  
**503-367-0098**  
**scott@vernoniasvoice.com**

**Contributors**  
Britt Bensen Steele  
Kala Cota  
Dr. Carol McIntyre  
Aaron Miller  
Karen Miller  
Grant Williams  
Representative Brad Witt

**Photography**  
Britt Bensen Steele  
Scott Laird

Want to advertise?  
Have an article?  
Contact: scott@vernoniasvoice.com

One year subscriptions  
(24 issues) \$35

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

**Vernonia's Voice, LLC**  
**PO Box 55**  
**Vernonia, OR 97064**  
**503-367-0098**

www.VernoniasVoice.com

but in some cases construction of these projects ended up altering drainage patterns and severely impacting neighboring properties. As you can imagine, parties on all sides have strong feelings about this. Tuesday's hearing was continued to an evening session and the parties sat down to get this bill to a better place. In Oregon, we are lucky to have smart, dedicated advocates for the conservation and farming communities that were able to work with all levels of government to chart a course forward. Thank you to everyone involved!

SB 1517A allows the governing body in Tillamook County to create a pilot program that would provide a mechanism for parties, prior to the approval or denial of a permit, to enter

*continued on page 13*

## Cedar Side Inn

---

**St. Patrick's Day**  
Corned beef & cabbage special  
Thursday, March 17th

**Karaoke**  
Every 2nd & Last Friday

**Taco Tuesday**  
from opening until 9pm  
3 hardshell or 1 softshell \$4.25

**Ladies' Night**  
every Thursday 6pm-close

---

• Free Pool • Free WiFi • Specialty Pizzas

---

*Check our Facebook page for daily specials and upcoming events*  
756 Bridge Street, Vernonia 503-429-5841

# All In

## Pub & Eatery

- Specialty hamburgers
- 8 Draft beers & mixed drinks
- 5 Craft beers on tap
- Pool tables & satellite TV
- Free Wi-fi
- Beer & Kegs to go

**FULL DISH SPORTS PACKAGE!**

Happy Hour Mon-Fri 4-7

**EVENTS**

Sat, March 12  
Moonshine

Sat, April 2  
Triple Edge Band

Sun, April 10  
Texas Hold 'Em

**"BIKER FRIENDLY"**

Sun - Thurs 11 AM - Midnight • Fri - Sat 11 AM - 2:30 AM  
733 Bridge St, Vernonia • 503-429-9999