

## Vernonia Voters Reject School Bond

In a blow to local education advocates, Vernonians voted against Measure 5-259, the Vernonia Schools Bond, defeating the measure by a 1,012 to 958 count. The failure to pass the bond results in the Vernonia School District missing out on receiving \$2.7 million in matching funding from the state to help finish the campus and also needing to find a way to make over \$400,000 in annual debt payments.

A visibly disappointed Aaron Miller, Superintendent of the Vernonia School District, told the School Board at their November 19 meeting that the failure to pass the bond will directly impact next year's budget and include cuts to programming in the classroom for students. "The fact is, we are still faced with those debts, and they are very real in how they are going to impact the District," said Miller.

The \$6.8 million bond measure would have eliminated \$4.1 million in debt the District carries from construction of the new campus that was completed in 2012. The District will now have to pay over \$400,000 annually in debt payments that will have to come from the District's general fund.

Following the catastrophic flood in 2007, voters approved a 2009 bond measure to move all three impacted Vernonia School District schools and District Office to higher ground and constructed a single K-12 building to house the entire district. The total cost to move the campus was \$42 million, with approximately \$13 million coming from the 2009 bond, \$12 million from FEMA for the buy-out of the old campus, and another \$11 million from state and federal

grants, and individuals and private foundation donations. The final \$5 million needed to complete construction was borrowed, with \$4.1 million in debt left as the balance still to be paid.

If approved Measure 5-259, which asked for \$0.24 per \$1,000 of assessed value, would have refinanced the current construction debt as well as guaranteed \$2.7 in matching funds from the state's new Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching (OSCIM) program, allowing the District to complete the campus and make needed repairs at the Mist Grade school. OSCIM funds are only available for capital construction projects and cannot be used to retire debt. Included in the proposal for the use of the bond funds and matching state grant were:

- Constructing, furnishing and equipping four new classrooms (including a dedicated art room) and welding/metals shop.
- Protecting the community's investment in Mist Grade School by replacing roofs, gutters, siding, flooring and mechanical systems.
- Improving technology with additional equipment and wireless access.
- Installation of playground equipment at both school campuses.
- Additional investments in school safety through installation of supplementary security systems.
- Completing athletic fields and facilities on the campus.
- Installation of irrigation system for natural resource programs and landscaping.

In the end, passing the bond and completing the campus would have given Vernonia

School District patrons a \$47 million dollar school campus for the overall price of \$19.8 million in local bonded debt.

Miller told the Board that the District is already considering a plan to bring another bond measure back before the community in the May 2017 election. "There is no doubt that we need to go out for another bond in May," said Miller. "We have to tackle this issue. It is critical for us as the School District, and I think it is extremely important that the community understand how important it is to them. We are the largest employer in this city and if we have to make the cuts we are talking about, it's not just going to impact the school. This town will be extremely different."

Miller suggested several options for a new bond, including just asking for enough to pay off the debt, but said that decision would require some analysis before a final determination was made. He said the District is required by law to present a balanced budget for next school year and will need to make full payments in the next budget cycle, beginning in July 2017. He explained the District made agreements with some of their loan holders to place those loans in forbearance for this year so they would not need to be paid, in the hopes the passage of the bond would eliminate those loans.

"When you're talking about cutting \$408,000 from a budget that has already been cut, and is already inadequate, there are not a lot of places to turn," said Miller.

School Board member Ernie Smith agreed with Miller.

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## SKIP gives Special Needs Children a Place to Gather

A new program has been started to give Vernonia's special needs children a place to meet and have fun.

Special Kids at Play (SKIP) is now meeting at the Vernonia Grange Hall on Tuesday afternoons from 4:00-5:30 pm and offers music, games, crafts, and snacks for all Vernonia Life Skills children.

The program was created as an alternative to Special Olympics activities which are not offered in Vernonia, says Gail Law, who started the program. Law's son Johnny is a participant in the program. The closest option for Special Olympics is in St. Helens.



*Volunteers Hayden Rau and Mason Hummel joined Johnny Law in a craft at the SKIP program.*

The SKIP program has numerous adult and youth volunteers available to help children who attend the program, but only a couple of children are participating so far, says Law. "We would really like the parents to bring their kids," she says.

Participants in the program listen to music (some of it played on the piano by one of the volunteers), sing, dance, play games, do arts and crafts projects, and go for walks around town and to city parks when the weather is nice. A small snack is provided. The program is being supported through volunteer funding.

Law says the volunteers that help with the program have really been great, especially the young third and fourth grade girls that help out each week. "They are so wonderful and treat the kids here just like they are their friends," says Law. "They hold their hands when we go out for walks and play with them just like they would with other kids."

"We just want these children to be part of the community and have activities they can participate in," says Law.

## November 2106 Election Results

### Vernonia Elects Mayor and Council Members, Rejects School Bond

Vernonia voters have elected Mario Leonetti as their new Mayor. Leonetti is a local businessman who previously served in city government for 18 years as both a City Councillor and as Mayor.

Vernonians also elected Bruce McNair and Susan Wagner to the City Council. This is the first time McNair has been elected to office after twice being selected to fill open seats on the Council. Wagner has an extensive background in City and community government, with experience serving as the chair of the City Budget Committee, chair of the City Planning Commission, and on the Vernonia

School Board.

In a crushing blow to local education advocates, Vernonia voters rejected Measure 5-259, the \$6.8 million Vernonia School Bond by a 51.3% to 48.6% margin, and missed out on receiving \$2.7 million in guaranteed matching funds from the state. The bond would have allowed the District to eliminate over \$4 million dollars in debt that carries an annual \$400,000 payment that is left over from the construction of the new school campus, along with paying for needed repairs to the Mist School building, and would also help fully complete the new campus.

Columbia County voters chose Margaret Magruder for Position 1 on the Board of Commissioners. Magruder defeated Wayne Mayo in a run-off vote and will join Alex Tardif, who was elected outright in the May election.

The two new commissioners join Henry Heimuller representing Columbia County.

Columbia County voters approved renewing a tax levy to fund county jail operations and also approved a new 3% tax on the retail sale of marijuana items in unincorporated areas of the County. Voters in Rainier, Scappoose, and St. Helens all approved similar types of marijuana taxes in their cities.

Statewide, 78.9% of eligible voters cast their ballots in this election. In Columbia County 78% of eligible voters participated.

At the State level, local voters re-elected Brad Witt to the State House; Debra Boone was also re-elected to the State House.

In state ballot measures, voters

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