

School Bond Panel Answers Questions *continued from front page*

to cost \$39 million, and the final \$14 million would be raised from federal, state, and private grants and donations. “We did have our kids in the new school by September 2012 but it was a push to make it happen, but we did not want to lose that \$12 million from FEMA,” said Bernal.

Bernal went on to explain that the final cost to build the school was \$42 million and fundraising efforts fell \$2 million short of the original goal of \$39 million plus the overage of \$3 million, leaving a \$5 million shortfall, which the District had to borrow in order to complete the project on time and meet FEMA’s deadline. The debt service to pay those \$5 million in loans, now down to about \$4.5 million, is approximately \$400,000 per year and has been paid annually through continuing fund raising efforts, which have now dried up. That debt service payment would be paid off with the passage of the bond, or will need to come from the School District general fund if the community fails to pass the bond. Superintendent Miller later explained that would, “...take away from what we can do to increase our effectiveness at educating our students in the community.” Bernal emphasized that the first priority if the bond is passed would be to eliminate that debt and free up that funding.

Senator Johnson discussed the past fundraising efforts that have taken place, noting that “...the whole state knows about Vernonia. For some of us this has been a 10 year odyssey. I am, in my private life a donor, and have worked on this steadily for 10 years and helped get about \$4 million from the state at a critical time.” Johnson went on to state that the Vernonia community stepped up to take care of their own kids when they passed the original \$13 bond, and that “...none of us at that time could have anticipated some of the things that were problematic,” in the efforts to raise the funds and complete the construction of the campus. “The grit and determination of this town to put itself back together again is a widely and well known story. To take advantage of the state’s generosity with the matching grant, once again finishes this story... and takes care of our kids. We have come an enormously long way. My plea to the voters of Vernonia is, let’s push this over the end and finish this... and take this off the worry list for the District.”

Superintendent Miller explained how the District qualified for the matching grant, noting that the District was eligible for up to \$4 million. Miller explained that matching funds are only eligible to be used for capital improvement projects and cannot be used for debt reduction.

Former School Board Chair Krahn explained that the District was initially unable to complete the school campus during the original construction because the project did not follow a normal construction schedule. He explained that normally you would not begin a construction project until you had all the funds raised, but in this particular case, because the money came from various sources at different times, when there became questions about whether enough funds would be raised,

parts of the project were eliminated. “It was a difficult mix and match as we went forward, and as previously mentioned, we had to have seats in the chairs by the fall of 2012 or we wouldn’t get the money from FEMA,” said Krahn. “We were gathering money as we went along. It was a very non-traditional way of public building.”

When an audience member commented that that was not a very smart way to build this type of project, Krahn responded that it was the only way it could be done in order to receive the \$12 million from FEMA. Senator Johnson added that, “...we were also watching an exodus out of the community. As the population dwindled, we believed this would stabilize the town. Was this the most prudent way to do it? No. Were we as opportunistic as we could have possibly been? Yes. And the result is, you drive up there, and there are the schools.”

Senator Johnson also discussed the opportunity that building a metal/welding shop would provide for Vernonia students, now that the Oregon Manufacturing and Innovation Center (OMIC) campus is moving forward in Scappoose. Johnson said the project in Scappoose would create a partnership with Boeing and their supply chain, and would provide student internships through PCC, who will reach out to students and “feeder schools” to increase career and technical education in local schools. “This is a huge opportunity for us and if this bond is successful you’ll have an opportunity to have a robust pipeline of kids feeding into OMIC.”

Superintendent Miller said the District has equipment for a new metal/welding shop in storage and will not need to purchase new equipment. He said the four classrooms that would be added to the campus were part of the original plans, but were cut as a cost saving measure when fundraising efforts fell short. Miller noted that if the bond passes it will take the District time to rebuild their programs. “We’ve been in crisis as a District since 2007,” said Miller. “Even if this bond passes, it’s going to take time to recover from all of those years of being in debt and in crisis.”

The School Bond Committee has sent out a detailed list of proposed projects that would be addressed if the bond passes. When asked if he could guarantee that all the items on that list would be completed, School Board Chair Costley said he would not guarantee it, but that the District has estimates and feels confident that they can do all the items on the list. “If we don’t have enough money we will do what we can,” said Costley. He said he would like to see a public process to identify priorities if the list needs to be modified. “I can guarantee that I will use my vote to make sure that we don’t overrun on this project and I believe we will be successful at managing the process.”

A member of the audience asked if it was cost effective to make repairs to the Mist School, or would it be better to close it. Superintendent Miller responded that because the Mist School is classified as a remote school, the District receives double funding from

the state for students that attend there and that the District receives more money than it costs to run the school. He also recognized that the District has made a commitment to the Mist community to keep the school open and intends to honor that commitment.

Another audience member who is a teacher in the District asked what happens if the bond doesn’t pass. “I’m relatively new to the community and relatively new to my career as a teacher,” said the audience member. “I’ve invested myself in this school and this community and it’s tough to stick around here, frankly. I’d like to stay but as a new teacher it’s tough to make that commitment with such a hazy future.” Senator Johnson addressed the question, noting that the bond failed to pass in November by just 54 votes. “I don’t live in this community but I care about this community enormously,” said Johnson

as she presented a personal check for \$1,000 to the School Bond Committee to help tell the story and pass the bond. “We are 54 votes short of closing the book on this story and giving dedicated teachers the certainty of creating an environment where our kids can thrive. I’ll admit that mistakes were made along the way. I’ll admit that there were unforeseen things that took more money than we anticipated. A group of us have done nothing for the last decade but try to figure out how to close the book on this. How can we bring certainty to this community? How do we close this chapter? I am just praying that the citizens of Vernonia believe that they can carry the last little bit. This ends the question of what happens with Vernonia schools and makes this the kind of community where people want to bring up their kids.”

Our Legacy

*How will you be remembered? What will they say?
What is your legacy? Did you make someone’s day?
Or maybe more than a day, did you affect someone’s goals?
Were you one of the reasons their success story was told?*

*One day I’ll ask myself, what is the difference I made?
Did I do enough? Did I help pave the way?
Our small town pioneers, they gave us a start
They knew children were precious, they did their part*


*Back in the day, someone once asked of them
Would they help build a school, to a child be a friend?
Whether they’re your children or not, they are our future
The next generation, it’s a good plan that we nurture*

*Improve, if we can, and wish for them better
Raise some good kids, a bunch of go-getters!
It’s not wasted money, it never has been
When we help those behind us we gain in the end*

*I won’t hesitate! For the bond, I’ll vote “YES!”
With the lottery funds, we’ve been doubly blessed
It’s just a small thing, but I’ll be paid back in smiles
Knowing I made a difference in the life of a child.*

~Kala Cota

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