

An Opinion: Why I Support the School Bond

By Scott Laird

"Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another."

—G. K. Chesterton

Since 2007 the administrators and staff at the Vernonia School District have been operating in crisis mode, scrambling to meet both the financial and educational needs of their District, the community, and our students.

Today we, the Vernonia voters, have an opportunity to toss our School District a lifeline and step up to meet an important community need - something Vernonians have a well known history of doing in the past.

Vernonia voters are being asked to approve a \$6.8 million bond that will pay off debt and allow the District to begin to return to normalcy again. I am supporting this bond because our teachers and staff, and especially our students, deserve this, and our community needs this.

Ten years ago, when all three schools were damaged in the 2007 flood, the District had no plans or reserves set aside to move the schools out of the flood zone and District officials had to quickly weigh their options and deal with how and where to house and continue educating students.

FEMA was offering to buyout the damaged campus for \$12 million and had stated they would no longer insure the District against future flood events. Meanwhile, experts were telling the community that the 100 year flood that occurred in 1996 now looked more likely to repeat itself about once a decade.

With that information the District made a difficult and risky choice - construct a new K-12 campus on high ground and pay for it by asking the community to pass a \$13 million bond, accept the FEMA offer of \$12 million, which contained a clause that students needed to be in a new building within five years, and roll the dice and hope they could raise the estimated balance of \$12 million.

Voters overwhelmingly approved that \$13 million bond in 2009, FEMA came through with their \$12 million buyout, and fundraising commenced for the balance, even while construction planning was already under way and progressing.

In the end, the fundraising fell short, while costs on the massive project

increased. In order to complete the project on schedule and meet FEMA's five year deadline, the District had to make cuts to the initial plans and borrow \$5 million to finish the project.

The beautiful new school did open in the fall of 2012, on schedule, which has to be seen as a huge and heroic success. The community rallied together to put their children first and constructed a new facility that will serve the community for the next century.

The downside of the story is that now the District is operating on the edge of a precipice. The debt service on the loans the District took to complete construction has been paid for mostly through ongoing fundraising efforts, which has slowly dried up and disappeared. The annual \$450,000 debt payment will now start coming from the District's General Fund and will require additional cuts to teachers, staff, school days, and programs.

While some of the choices made by the Administration following an unexpected natural disaster could be questioned, I believe the District did what they thought would be best for the students and necessary for the community at the time.

Now a difficult decision falls on the community: step up and support the District with an additional bond, or turn their backs on our students, teachers and staff. For me, it's a no-brainer.

The ask from the District is small - just 20 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, which equates to about \$20-\$40 a year or \$2 to \$3 a month, for most homes in the voting District. Paying off the debt will allow the District to begin the process of fully recovering from the financial crisis they have been dealing with for the past decade and begin rebuilding programs and staff levels.

The extra money, \$2.3 million over and above the \$4.5 million of debt, will be matched by the state; it is on the table and will go to another District if Vernonia does not pass the bond, which is exactly what happened in November. Those extra funds will allow the District to add needed classrooms and complete the new campus and make repairs and upgrades at the aging Mist School.

What happens if the community fails to pass the bond? While this is mostly speculative, what is for sure is that the District, already struggling to make ends meet, will be forced to make some very difficult and painful cuts. The school will almost assuredly lose

teaching positions and aides, class sizes will almost surely increase, the already small choice of electives will be further reduced, and some extracurricular activities will likely be eliminated. It's pretty easy to begin imagining school classrooms with 40 or more students, no middle school sports programs, and no foreign language studies or other electives.

While Vernonia has recently been experiencing a strong growth spurt, which helps us all when our utility rates are spread among more households, given the above scenario, it will not be surprising if families start choosing to not relocate here, move away, or place their students in private schools, while the families that do not have those options, or choose to stay, will be left with less resources. Since the District receives funding for their operations from the state based on enrollment, further reductions will lead to more cuts in the budget and more reductions in staff and programs. It will likely become a downward spiral.

An underfunded school district is not a good recipe for a vibrant community and is not a place where businesses and families will choose to start or locate. Since the 2007 flood this community has been able to relocate their schools, health center, electric utility headquarters, and the new Senior Center/Food Bank will break ground this fall, plus we raised or moved approximately 80 households above the food level. All that in 10 years!

The final piece to the flood recovery story for Vernonia is to pay off the debt from the school.

While the state of Oregon continues to underfund public education, this bond is a chance for Vernonia to make education a priority and take care of itself and our children.

This community has proven time and again that they care, are up to the challenge, and will do what it takes to survive. This bond is just one more opportunity.

"There is a place in America to take a stand: it is public education. It is the underpinning of our cultural and political system. It is the great common ground. Public education after all is the engine that moves us as a society toward a common destiny... It is in public education that the American dream begins to take shape."

—Tom Brokaw

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