

Vernonia, Ten Years After the Flood: Part 1 – Quick Rising Waters Have Massive Impact

On December 3, 2007 Vernonia suffered catastrophic flooding. Ten years later we take a look back on the flood and what has changed in the community in this two-part series.

By Scott Laird

On Saturday, December 1, 2007 Vernonians gathered to celebrate the holiday season with a new all-day event, The Spirit of Christmas in Vernonia. The day's festivities closed with a Lighted Parade up Bridge Street with Santa and Mrs. Claus arriving and helping to light the community Christmas tree at City Hall. As the Vernonia High School band performed, large wet snow flakes fell from the sky - holiday cheer in the form of beautiful and wet precipitation.

That precipitation turned out to be the start of two hurricane type storms that, first pelted the Oregon coast with high winds and driving rain, and then parked itself over the Coast Range and the Upper Nehalem Valley, dumping almost 18 inches of rain over the next 48 hours. The rain continued to fall through Monday evening and caused both Rock Creek, and then the Nehalem River, to overflow their banks. The ensuing flood and the damage it caused changed the lives of many Vernonia residents and the community as a whole forever.

Ten years later a lot has changed in Vernonia. Residents and City leaders, along with numerous state and federal agencies all worked together to move vital community services, residents, and businesses up and out of the flood zone and onto higher ground. Vernonia's process for development has been altered, and the way

Vernonians prepare when waters start to rise each winter has changed.

What happened on December 3

The fast rising waters caught almost everyone by surprise. On Monday morning reports began trick-

water from the Rock Creek/Nehalem confluence began to back up across the sports fields behind the Vernonia School District property, and then entered the school buildings themselves. Volunteers, led by Superintendent Ken Cox tried to salvage food from



ling in - first a flooded basement, then water from Rock Creek backing up



where it enters the Nehalem River. First Responders were activated and started going door-to-door to encourage evacuations. Around 10:00 am

the cafeteria freezers and refrigerators, wading through thigh deep water.

Around noon more calls came in about high water, first on North Mist Drive, then from the Timber Road area as the Nehalem breached its banks both north and south of Vernonia. Evacuation centers were quickly established at the old Lincoln Grade School building on the south side of town, at St. Mary's Catholic Church on the north side, and at Cedar Ridge Conference Center on Keasey Road. Electric power was cut off and then the phone system went down, leaving many residents unable to contact each other.

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Columbia County Cancels Contract with Columbia Humane Society

The Columbia County Board of Commissioners will resume its role in the care of animals seized by county law enforcement officers beginning January 1, 2018, after canceling their contract with Columbia Humane Society (CHS) to manage the welfare of stray, neglected, and abused dogs, or licensing dogs within the county.

CHS's mission is to assist the community in the successful re-homing and training of adoptable animals. The Holsheimer Lamar Animal Shelter, where the CHS currently operates, was created in 1995 as a joint venture between CHS and Columbia County. The funding for the building was supplied by a CHS donor, and the land was supplied by Columbia County. For the past four years, at the County's request, CHS has provided medical care, food, enrichment, and shelter to the county's animals until they could be reconnected with their owners; those duties will again now be managed by the Sheriff's Department and Animal Control.

The effects of the contract cancellation on CHS will result in the following: reduced office hours (CHS will only be open to the public Tuesday, Saturday, and Sunday, Noon - 5:00 pm); viewings and adoptions by appointment only; loss of three staff positions; loss of fourteen indoor kennels and eight outdoor kennels, approximately one third of previous capacity; loss of one third of their operating budget.

According to a press release from Columbia County the contract with CHS was terminated after a review by the Sheriff's Office showed inefficiencies in managing the contract. The review also revealed complaints from customers regarding the manner in which CHS staff treated dog owners and others interested in county-held dogs. Further review with legal counsel also showed that CHS had failed to uphold other terms of

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Columbia County Commissioners Approve Port Westward Rezone

Columbia County Commissioners voted on November 29 to rezone 837 acres of agricultural land at Port Westward to Industrial. The request to rezone the land was made by the Port of St. Helens.

The controversial decision marks the latest development in a long-running effort to expand the high-impact industrial development in the Columbia River estuary in rural Columbia County. Hundreds of citizens and local farmers turned out to public hearings over the last several months, urging the county to protect high-value cropland from fossil fuel and other heavy industrial development.

The vote was two to one with Commissioner Alex Tardif casting the dissenting vote. "We are looking to the past and continue to look at fossil fuels and industry to carry us to the future

time and time again," he said. "We are now in the imagination era headed into the intellectual era, and for me, to rezone more than 4 percent of the remaining primary agricultural land in north county to industrial land is not looking to the future."

In addition to the amount of acreage, Tardif later stated his concerns about access to the dock at Port Westward, which is currently only accessible via PGE land leased from the Port. "I am not comfortable with the current terms for this," he said. "Not having certainty that future tenants would have access to the existing dock or rail lines is not acceptable."

The county commissioner's vote marks the Port of St. Helens' second attempt to remove agricultural protection from farmland at Port Westward. The Port of St. Helens revived ef-

orts to expand the industrial boundary at Port Westward after farmer and business owner Mike Seely and Columbia Riverkeeper's legal challenge to the rezone prevailed at the Oregon's Land Use Board of Appeals in 2014.

"1000 Friends is disappointed in the Board's decision," said Meriel Darzen, attorney for 1000 Friends of Oregon, which commented on the proposal. "The agricultural lands in Columbia County contain highly productive soils and access to clean water. These resources are limited and for that reason are protected by Oregon's land use laws from conversion to nonagricultural uses. The Board's decision ignores the grave implications of converting these lands for fossil fuel development."

Prior to the vote, Commissioner Margaret Magruder said, "The intent of
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