

# Vernonia, Ten Years After the Flood: Part 2 – The Recovery *continued from front page*

Grade School, except for the basement which housed the cafeteria. The Middle School building was cleaned and became the cafeteria for the entire district, along with classrooms for students. Modular classrooms were added for students and used for the next several years. Meanwhile the High School sat empty awaiting a decision by the District on how to move forward.

In April 2008 Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski named Vernonia an Oregon Solutions Project, a collaborative process which helps tackle and expedite large community issues by providing access to key decision makers at the state level.

The recovery process continued through the summer and into the fall of 2008. Demolition of the east wing of the high school began and the gymnasium and locker rooms were repaired to allow school sporting contests to be held. While numerous homes were lifted or demolished, many residents were still waiting for funding to repair or buyout their homes. December 2008, one year after the flood, still found WOE, the Health Center, the schools, Vernonia Cares, and the Senior Center in their same locations and vulnerable to another flood. A large storm began on December 13 and dumped 24 inches of snow on Vernonia during the next nine days, knocking out power, canceling school, and forcing the City to open shelters and declare a State of Emergency for the second year in a row. It was a stark reminder than the community remained at the mercy of the weather.

### The Long Recovery Process

In March of 2009 the Vernonia School Board approved a site for the new school campus and in November Vernonia voters approved a \$13 million school bond to initiate the construction. In 2010 the District began a capital campaign to raise the rest of the \$24 million that was estimated to complete the project. Completing the financing became a major project over the next several years. The design of the school campus saw many changes and alterations before ground was finally broke on December 2, 2010, a fitting date almost exactly three years after the flood. In January of 2011 it was announced that FEMA would buyout the old school site for \$11.2 million, providing a major portion of the further funding needed for the project.

In December of 2009 the Board



The demolition of Washington Grade School took place in February 2013.



Members of Christian Aid Ministries spent several months assisting Vernonians with home repairs.

of Directors at WOE agreed to move forward with construction of a new headquarters facility and approved a \$3 per month increase to rates in October 2010 in order to pay for the construction. The new headquarters was dedicated in August of 2011 and became the first major piece of infrastructure to be moved out of the flood zone.

While some of these larger projects were starting to take shape, it wasn't until July of 2010, 31 months after the flood, that Ernie and Robin Smith and their children became the first family to complete a FEMA buyout and move into a new home after the flood. While many homes had been repaired or raised using insurance and FEMA funding during those first two years, the Smiths had spent the previous two and a half years living with friends, in a travel trailer, in a FEMA manufactured home, in a couple of rentals, and in an RV at Anderson Park, waiting for the complicated FEMA buyout process to be organized and implemented.

In October of 2011 the Sentry

Market (now R&S Market) completed construction of a concrete brick flood wall around the outside of the store, which had 22 inches of water inside during the flood. FEMA paid for 75% of the \$200,000 cost of the wall which was designed to seal the interior of the store from water and protect the community's only grocery store and a vital resource.

Vernonia finally celebrated the opening of the new schools campus in August 2012. The project utilized a complex combination of federal and state aid dollars, grants from state, federal, and private sources, local fundraisers, and federal loans, to cobble together the funding, but the final cost still ended up millions of dollars over the original projected budget of \$37 million. School District residents approved a second

\$6.8 million bond in May 2017 which paid off about \$5 million in debt and added funds to complete the campus with a football field and track, and add four classrooms. The District is slowly moving their sports facilities to the new campus; Alumni Field now hosts softball games, and their new baseball field should be ready for use this spring.

In 2014 the Vernonia Health Center celebrated the opening of their new facility, the Carolyn Keasey Memorial Building in what is called the Rose Avenue Project, across the street from the new WOE headquarters. The Health Center utilized grants from private foundations, a FEMA buyout of \$170,000, and \$190,000 in donations raised by Providence Health following the flood, to build their facility debt free with no public funding.

Following their moves, the old school campus buildings, the old WOE headquarters, and the old Health Center building were all demolished. As part of their FEMA buyout, the School District constructed new sports fields and created the new Spencer Park, replacing city fields that were lost at the new campus site. Other sites that received FEMA funds for buyouts, including homes and businesses, remain vacant or little used, as they fall under strict FEMA guidelines for future use that allow little or no construction.

*continued on page 18*

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