

Meet the Candidates : Vernonia Mayor, City Council, and Columbia County Sheriff *continued from front page*

High School, worked in the woods as a logger for 13 years, and recently retired from the Wauna Mill. He has served on the Vernonia Public Works Committee for the last eight years and served on the Vernonia Budget Committee last year. He has served on Boards for the Izaak Walton League, North Coast Game Association, and the Salmon Trout Advisory Committee for the State of Oregon, serving as Chair in his final term. He has volunteered extensively in community projects around Vernonia. He says he would like to help the City continue to make progress and “stay on an even keel.” He thinks it’s important that if Vernonia grows that it grows responsibly.

When asked about their understanding of the day-to-day operations of the City of Vernonia, including City staff and the different departments, the Council, and City Advisory Committees, Webb said the Council sets the goals and expectations for the City Administrator and it is their job to make sure the staff are meeting those goals. He said the Council takes guidance and recommendations from the Advisory Committees, who represent the citizens and provide in-depth knowledge on specific areas of the City operations. Council makes the final decisions on policy. He said it’s important that the leadership doesn’t get complacent and works through issues.

Seager said day-to-day operations are done under the direction of the City Administrator who works for the Council as a collective body. He said the Advisory Committees make recommendations to the Council and City Administrator. The City Administrator manages the departments, including Public Works, Parks, and Police.

Allen said the City Administrator runs day-to-day operations and is able to hire and fire employees. The City Administrator is hired, and could be fired, by the Council. He noted that the City has had numerous City Administrators before the current one, and said the consensus is the current Administrator is doing a good job. Advisory Committees bring information and recommendations to Council and Council makes final decisions. He said a Budget Committee works on the annual budget and Council has final approval to adopt it.

Hult said the Council directs the

City Administrator by working collaboratively to set ordinances and regulations, and set goals and direct the City Administrator, who instructs staff how to carry out those goals. Hult said the volunteer Advisory Committees are very important and invaluable, and help the Council to make informed decisions. “I really rely on the people on those Committees who do the back work to make me better informed in order to make a good decision for the City.” She said City staff in the Public Works department, parks, finance, and the GIS planner, are all well trained and are doing a good job and are a major contributor to the success of the City.

Hobart says the different parts all need to successfully work together. He said the current City Administrator is doing a good job. “It all starts with the Mayor and the Council and everyone has an interest.”

When asked about specific priorities and projects they would try to address, Allen said his focus would be completion of the Senior Center/Food Bank because those groups deserve it, and the money is there. “In construction we deal with budgets and we deal with solutions to challenges.” He said it’s important that the facility operates at no cost to the City. “That’s my mission and if I don’t get it done, I wouldn’t want you to vote for me again.” He said streets are only 3% of the annual budget and should be a priority.

Seager said the Council recently discussed their 47 current projects and priorities and said his main priority was City streets. He said the house at the cemetery is also a priority, and said the Senior Center is high on his list and should get done this coming year.

Webb said City streets are at the top of his list of priorities and says the City has a current survey of streets and preliminary estimates of costs for priority areas. He said the City may need to ask the citizens for a small amount of money to implement a five year plan. He said he would like to better understand the vision and the citizen needs for City Parks, and would like to see a plan for moving forward with operations and maintenance. He also would like to prioritize growth and development around the City, both inside and outside the City boundaries.

Hobart said he would like to encourage more volunteerism to help clean up the City, like the old Vernonia Pride. He said he is already part of a newly formed group that has done some landscaping projects. He said streets are also important. He said the Senior Center has limited participation, but said he supports the project.

Hult named the Senior Center/Food Bank as a priority. She said sale of the cemetery house could provide some capacity in the City budget. She said street improvements and other infrastructure to encourage new development are needed. She said the City needs to look for creative ways to spend money and get projects moving.

When asked how the City could improve their performance or better serve the citizens of the community, Hult said she has been the Chair of the Budget Committee for the last couple of years and knows strong management of the budget is important. She said the City should work to do a better job communicating information to the community, and needs to find ways to appropriately use social media. She said sharing information can help maintain trust with the citizens.

Hobart said he is an optimist and always looks for the good in people. He says the City has survived two floods, has had to ask the citizens to pass two school bonds, and is trying to get Spencer Park fully operational. “We’re under a lot of strain.” He said the City should try to improve relationships and work together. He said the City should use the experience and knowledge gained on the Sewer Upgrade Project and use it on future projects.

Webb says the Police Department takes up a big share of the annual budget and the citizens’ property taxes, and says he would like to take a look at how officers are performing their duties. He said development outside the city, that doesn’t contribute to the tax base, puts a strain on City services, especially Police. “We need to grow from the inside out so we can keep up with demand.” He said it would benefit the community if the City used a Public Information Officer whose duty was to share relevant information. He said it was important to encourage volunteerism.

Seager said the City should just continue doing what they’ve been doing. He said we have a good City Administrator and staff, good active Advisory Committees, and a Council that is working well together. He said the City could improve communications and finding ways to share information.

Allen said communication is important and would like the City to utilize social media to inform citizens. He said Town Hall meetings should be used to get community input before final decisions are made. “We need to get a feel of what the people want before we pass an ordinance.” He said the City should encourage more volunteerism, especially in the youth. He suggested the City award benefits to volunteers who help the City with maintenance or find more ways to recognize volunteers. He suggested a place where volunteers could register to be part of projects. “This town was built on volunteers.”

The panel was asked who they thought the City should be collaborating with and building important partnerships with, both inside and outside of the community. Seager said the Citizen Advisory Committees are important to work with. He said the City needs to work with outside agencies, including governmental groups and legislators like State Senator Betsy Johnson.

Webb said it was import to collaborate with local citizens and listen to their views. He said we need to partner with the County, particularly the Sheriff’s Office. He mentioned the Vernonia School District, but said that the District represents patrons who live outside City limits, so the City needs to be cautious that they look out for their own patrons first. He said our governmental legislators were important in helping Vernonia’s flood recovery effort, and said good communication with state agencies can be useful. He suggested we try to collaborate with the timber industry who owns surrounding property.

Hobart said it was important to collaborate with the Sheriff’s Office and try to increase participation in Search and Rescue.

Hult said first and foremost it was important for the Council to work collaboratively with each other, with the Advisory Committees, and with staff. She said it was important to work with outside agencies, including social services. Locally she highlighted the Senior Center, Vernonia Cares, the Vernonia School District, the Vernonia Rural Fire Department and EMTs, and even West Oregon Electric Cooperative which can help make the community business friendly. She said during flood recovery it was important to collaborate with county, state, and federal agencies and representatives. She mentioned other economic development agencies, including the South Columbia County Chamber of Commerce, which is now handling that function for Vernonia.

Allen said we need to work with the state and federal governments, even if we don’t like some of the regulations they enforce, because they were very helpful following the flood. He said grant money from state and federal agencies has helped Vernonia.

When asked what resources they would use to better inform themselves about the issues they lack knowledge of and will be making decisions on, Webb stated that he has found it helpful in past work experiences to find someone who has similar knowledge to use as a sounding board and exchange information. He would use other Councilors and the City Administrator as well as on-line resources.

Seager said he would start at City Hall and use the internet.

Allen said the internet is a resource. He said you should always admit if you don’t know about something and ask questions.

Hult said talking to experts on the subject, especially staff that does the job everyday, is the best way. She also said looking at historical data can be useful, as can using the internet to research information. She said having a trusted person to just bounce ideas off of can be

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Steve and Gracie live in Vernonia

