

The INDEPENDENT

Serving the upper Nehalem River valley. Published twice monthly, on the first and third Wednesdays of each month, by Public Opinion Laboratory Ltd., 725 Bridge Street, Vernonia, OR 97064, as a free newspaper. Editors and Publishers, Dirk & Noni Andersen, (503) 429-9410.

Opinion

Are public meetings public without ears?

Though citizens claim that their elected representatives do or fail to do all sorts of things, the claims last month that the Vernonia City Council had failed to provide enough information about the municipal building project were truly astounding.

The current project recommendations are the result of a study initiated nearly a year ago by a large citizens committee. The committee was chaired by Jan Miyasaki and every one of their numerous meetings was public. Is it the fault of the committee or the council or the City of Vernonia that the "public" didn't attend the meetings?

Questions were also raised about the need for such a facility. This question isn't as surprising as the claims of lack of information, though the information has been available far longer...which may be part of the problem.

In January, 1985, the first issue of *The INDEPENDENT* reported on structural problems with city hall. That report included the comment by former Columbia County building official Bob Eidem, that the back wall was in condition to be condemned.

That report was the catalyst for expanding the fire hall in order to move the ambulances out of city hall into a safe building. That expansion took several years and a lot of hard work by citizen volunteers, both in obtaining the funds for the work and in performing a lot of the work. They were aided by both the city and the fire district.

At that time, the police department was not located in City Hall, but was in space rented from the Vernonia Federal Credit Union. As money became tighter, it became necessary to move the police department into part of the space formerly occupied by the ambulance association. With that move, the city was, once again, placing employees in a building that was unsafe.

More recently, in 1996, city hall was inspected by two different engineering firms. One of them reported that the building should be replaced. The other said it could be repaired, sort of, by (1) replacing the roof and (2) replacing the walls. This study was reported and was discussed in council meetings. It was another part of the cautious approach by city government to be absolutely certain the municipal building was necessary.

The INDEPENDENT has chided the council when they seem to ignore the value of public input, most recently over the Scout Building. But there is no way the city council or city government can honestly be accused of failing to put information about the municipal building project before the public.

The council has said they will set a town hall meeting on the project, and they will do so. The question now is: Who will attend? With people claiming inadequate information after more than a year of intense public activity, it's doubtful that more than thirty people will bother to attend.

As Mayor Art Parrow said at a recent council meeting: "Citizens have a responsibility to be informed." Who will accept that responsibility?



City Scene

By Julius Dalzell
Vernonia City Councilor

Let's talk communications! That's an interesting subject when one considers that this column is for the purpose of communicating to you events, decisions and reasons concerning the City and residents. *The Independent* is a communications conduit directed at capturing and communicating a broad set of happenings. So why this item?

The City Council fundamentally is charged with conducting the affairs of Vernonia. Council meetings essentially are business meetings and should be so. Yes, we receive comments from the floor, but the time permitted is limited. The rules are established to assist with getting business accomplished.

Difficulty arises when a subject needs to be dialogued. We, the City Council, announce (or communicate if you would), public hearings. Those public hearings are most often sparingly attended. Regardless, we proceed to make decisions based on what we have heard and what needs to be accomplished.

Why are the public hearings of such apparent little interest? Or are we not getting the word out that there is a public hearing in the first place? The requirements are clear regarding how we are to announce a hearing. The reasons for the apparent lack of interest are, most probably, several in number. We are all very busy people in this day and age. Often there is not time to even thoroughly read this paper, the principle mechanism used in Vernonia. Recently, I was late for a public hearing because I did not include the hearing in my handwritten notes at the previous

meeting of the council. Sound familiar?

So if the City is making the proper efforts to communicate hearings and yet not really succeeding, what to do? We could print notices and post in public places. But there are restrictions as well as cost of printing and time required. Another idea is to have a bulletin board somehow made available for street viewing at City Hall, as an addition to what we're already doing. We'll try that mechanism, however it does require folks to get in the habit of dropping by the board while downtown.

We are looking for other practical ideas. Someone mentioned cable. Another person suggested a "Town Crier" but that's a bit much.

Once in a while a major issue comes along that demands broad city involvement. Such a case is the planned construction of the new Vernonia Building (Municipal Building). We are at key stages in design and financing. The issue of need is still being bantered about by a few, although development of the project to date has been overseen by a committee of the public. Those committee meetings were both announced and open. Because of continuing questions, the City Council wishes to host a Town Hall meeting dedicated to this subject. The time targeted is late August or early September.

For this event, we will broadly communicate the meeting purpose, date, location, and time. Several organizations and individuals have offered assistance in getting the word out. So let's see if such an effort works. Maybe we can glean some ideas for communicating the more frequently held public hearings and workshops.