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The INDEPENDENT

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"Voice of the Upper Nehalem River Valley"

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Smiling donor...



Washington Grade School teacher Rachel Camp has a big smile as she finishes donating a pint of blood and the phlebotomist starts to remove the needle. The Red Cross Blood Drive on Feb. 17 was sponsored by the leadership class at Vernonia High School.

47J shortens school year by six days

With no economic respite in sight, Vernonia School District directors shortened the school year by six days, at their February 13 meeting.

Superintendent Mike Funderburg detailed the loss of \$191.2 million from the state school fund, which resulted in a shortfall of \$289 per student in the Vernonia school district since the budget was approved last June. Deputy Clerk Dawn Plews projected the deficit at \$263,788 by subtracting previously anticipated revenue from expenditures budgeted for the remainder of the 2002-2003 school year.

Funderburg presented the board with three options to resolve this year's deficit, all of which incorporated a freeze on district expenditures, including field trips. Before any expenditures are approved, teachers will have to convince, first, their principal and then the superintendent that the expense is necessary. Savings of \$50,000 to \$75,000 could be produced by the freeze.

Spring sports will not be cut because salaries for most varsity coaches have already been included in monthly payments for teachers. Coaches have been informed that there will be no stipend for junior varsity coaches, who will have to be volunteers. The number of games in the spring schedule was reduced last year and the savings that would result from eliminating spring sports is not justified by the negative impact it would have on students, Funderburg said. Cutting staff or programs is not a viable option at this point in the school year, either.

Two of the three options presented included borrowing from the district's own capital projects fund (CPF). This fund is dedicated to capital projects

such as new buildings. The district can borrow from this fund but is required to repay it within five years. Board members Jim Krahn and Leslie O'Leary expressed concerns about repayment. O'Leary was also concerned about increasing contractual costs with both unions, but Funderburg explained that both contracts include clauses which allow the board to re-open negotiations for financial reasons. The board may consider this action in the future.

All three options included reducing the number of days in the school year. The first two options cut six and eight days, bringing savings of \$150,000 and \$200,000 respectively, and balanced the budget by borrowing from the CPF. The third option would have cut 10 days from the school calendar and made up the entire amount of the deficit without borrowing from the CPF.

Funderburg's recommendation was to cut six days. He said he was optimistic that borrowing could be limited to \$50,000- \$60,000 and possibly as little as \$40,000. He also reported that he met with staff immediately following the failure of Measure 28 to inform them that it appeared the district would have to cut days. Members of both the classified and certified unions met to develop a list of days to cut which would have the least impact on instruction. Two of the six days will not affect instruction; one was scheduled for teacher in-service training, the other for parent conferences. The remainder will be taken just before or after a holiday.

Please see page 15

Banks School days also reduced. See page 12 for details.

VRFPD board, volunteers set workshop

By Noni Andersen

Following publicity about the need for volunteer firefighters who can respond to emergencies during weekday hours, *The INDEPENDENT* and some community members asked why a qualified daytime volunteer was rejected by the Vernonia Volunteer Firefighters Association, when she had been approved by the fire district.

The question was first asked at a meeting of the volunteers' association, then was asked the following night at a meeting of the Vernonia fire district board of directors. There was no definitive response to the question at either meeting, but the community disapproval did stimulate the board to set a workshop with the volunteers in

order to open communications between the two groups.

An example of the lack of communication: At the volunteer meeting, Fire Chief Paul Epler presented a letter asking for an explanation, in writing, of the process used in rejecting the applicant. He was told publicly by volunteer president Ernie Smith that "We will not give a written response."

The next night, at the board meeting one of the volunteers complained, on the record, that Epler wanted the answers "right away" and wouldn't give them time to respond.

The same night another volunteer complained that Epler hadn't bought "turnouts" for two new firefighters, as he was supposed to do. Asked when the

request was turned in, the complainant said, "At noon today."

The volunteers, understandably, want to run their organization without oversight by the district. The district, on the other hand, must adhere to rules, regulations and statutes that have changed considerably over the years.

Everyone involved has the best interests of the community in mind. Nevertheless, board members need to pay more attention to what is going on with the volunteers; volunteers need to pay more attention to the legal requirements for the district, instead of complaining when they don't get their way.

The workshop will be at 7:00 p.m., Feb. 24 at the fire hall. It is a public meeting.