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THE INDEPENDENT

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"Voice of the Upper Nehalem River Valley"

November 6, 2003

Nature's bonus...



Downtown, water ordinance and parade

Vernonia City Council, during their Oct. 20 and Nov. 3 meetings, set dates for several public hearings and workshops. They also reviewed the city's water ordinance and approved incorporating "Smart Development" principals into the City's development ordinance.

A workshop on economic development will be held Nov. 17 in the form of a town hall meeting (details on page 3). Another workshop is scheduled for Dec. 1 to review proposed changes in the City's water ordinance. Among other modifications, the changes would require liability by the owners of rental properties for payment of water and sewer utilities.

Also scheduled Dec. 1 is a 6:30 p.m. public hearing on a request by Jim Brunsman to vacate a portion of G Street.

Another public hearing, January 19, 2004, will be to get public input on a proposed downtown zone. The time will be announced later.

Council approved a request by Robert Baker for a Christmas Lights parade of trucks on December 6 and directed staff to assist him with necessary permits. The parade is tentatively scheduled to start at McLean Road Builders, on N. Mist Drive, through town on Bridge Street and end at the vacant lot between Weed and Rose Avenues.

The lighted trucks will include log, lumber, chip and dump trucks, Baker explained.

Council has agreed to remove the old city hall and construct a new building at the site for use as a learning center. A grant has been obtained for the job, and city staff will meet with U.S. Bank to discuss how to handle the common wall separating the two spaces.

City agreed to a hardship exemption for the Vernonia Grange that excuses a portion of water and sewer fees. The agreement covers a six-month period, retroactive from July, 2003, until January, 2004. The Grange is working on fundraisers.

Local property taxes show small increase

Although many Columbia County property tax bills are lower this year, due to lower levies for bonded debt and urban renewal in some areas, the typical tax bill increased 3.24 percent inside the City of Vernonia and 3.39 percent in the rural areas of Vernonia. These increases resulted from higher bonded debt levies for both Portland Community College and the Vernonia Rural Fire District. Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire District property owners also saw an increase, of 2.94 percent.

Under the property tax system implemented by Measure 50, passed by Oregon voters in 1997, taxing districts have frozen tax rates for operating purposes. At the same time assessed values of individual properties are limited to a maximum three percent increase each year unless the property is improved, subdivided, rezoned or disqualified from special assessment or exemption. These are considered "exceptions" to the three percent increase in assessed value.

The result of these two provisions of Measure 50 is that

most property owners can expect a predictable three percent increase in their property tax bill each year. With one significant exception.

"Whether a property owner's tax bill goes up more than three percent or less than three percent is almost exclusively the result of changes in local option and bonded debt levy rates, which are not limited by Measure 50," Columbia County Assessor Tom Linhares explained.

Tax bills for typical residential and commercial properties inside the City of Scappoose, declined by 2.20 percent due to the Scappoose Library District paying off the library building, combined with a reduction in the City's bonded debt. In the City of Rainier, property taxes declined by more than five percent in response to the City paying off bonds for upgrading the city's water system and the Rainier Economic Development Council's reduction in the urban renewal special levy.

Elsewhere in the county, rural Scappoose properties saw a 2.14 percent increase.

St. Helens residential property owners saw a 3.69 percent increase in their tax bill inside the city and 3.78 percent increase outside the city due to slightly higher bonded debt for the St. Helens School District and a new, higher permanent tax rate for the Columbia River Fire & Rescue District.

Columbia City owners are also paying a little more for fire protection, but a decrease in the City's bonded debt offset that amount so tax bills increased by only 2.69 percent.

Property tax bills in the Clatskanie area were 3.14 percent higher inside the City and 3.23 percent higher in the rural areas because of an increase

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Non-Voters defeat 9-1-1 levy renewal

Seventy percent of the voters who cast ballots in the November 4 election approved renewal of an operating levy for Columbia County's 9-1-1 dispatching district. Only 30 percent voted against the renewal.

Nevertheless, the levy renewal was defeated because only 34 percent of the registered voters in the county filled out a ballot. Though the levy was overwhelmingly approved by those who voted, the double majority election required at least 50 percent, plus one, of registered voters to vote.