

# The INDEPENDENT

Serving the upper Nehalem River valley. Published on the first and third Thursdays of each month, by Public Opinion Laboratory Ltd., 725 Bridge St., Vernonia, OR 97064, as a free newspaper. Publishers, Dirk & Noni Andersen. Editor, Noni Andersen. Phone/Fax: 503-429-9410, email: noni@the-independent.net Display Advertising, Clark McGaugh, email: clark@the-independent.net Classified Advertising, Rebecca McGaugh, email: rebecca@the-independent.net

## Opinion

### A new school building is right; method was wrong

Vernonia school buildings – their condition and their adequacy for current educational needs – were the subject of two long term studies done by volunteer committees, one before and one after the 1996 flood. Both studies resulted in recommendations for new school buildings, with one suggesting the district buy property for a high school on a separate campus.

Both studies recognized the undeniable fact that the existing buildings are inadequate for their current uses. Additionally, both committees felt it was highly unlikely that either Lincoln or Washington Grade Schools, both of which were constructed of unreinforced masonry in the 1920s, could be modified enough to make them either functional or safe, but that Vernonia High School, built in 1950, could be modified sufficiently for a middle or junior high school.

The one effort at getting voter approval for a bond issue met with insurmountable obstacles: The election committee used a “concept” for the buildings instead of drawings, and many people can’t “see” concepts. Voters also felt the bond amount was too high because it was designed for all of the buildings instead of going phase by phase.

A subsequent study in 2003, when both the national and state economy were very bad, found that voters were not improving with age and WGS had more and more problems; the board felt it was important to start a building program and borrowed for that purpose.

That decision was correct...unfortunately, some other decisions alienated the community. Closing LGS before the new building was built and increasing primary class sizes was a bad choice. Failing to involve the community in design, location and usage of the new building was a bad choice.

District residents are angry because they have not been involved in decisions they will pay for. Parents are angry because they feel the overcrowding – and some other decisions – are harmful to their children.

Public boards should never forget the importance of communication. The “*We know what’s needed*” attitude of the present school board is the reason there are so many candidates for their positions.



### Salem Scene

By Representative Brad Witt  
Oregon District 31



Each day House members are allowed three minutes to talk about any subject they choose. Typically, most Legislators do not use their allotted time, but [recently] I decided to talk about the damage that has been done to our children’s education by the lack of school funding provided by the Legislature since the passage of Ballot Measure 5. The following is part of what I said on Tuesday:

I want to express my grave concern on an issue that’s very close to the hearts of my constituents in the lower Columbia region—education. The schools in my House district have already endured the bitter realities of budget cuts, year after year.

In Astoria, for example, the combination of declining student population and reduced state support has caused a double dose of harm—lower revenues per child, resulting in lower-quality programs, bigger class sizes and a shorter school year.

In Clatskanie, the revenue for 2003-2004 was less than the revenue in 1981-1982. We all know that the same amount of money buys a lot less today than it did in 1981.

In St. Helens, successive cuts in state support have forced the district to end 21 teaching positions during the past four years, as well as posi-

tions for school librarians and guidance counselors, athletics and maintenance, and other programs.

School districts all across Oregon will face the bleak necessity of downsizing support staff by 19 percent, laying off more than 900 teachers, cutting an average of eight school days, eliminating training for teachers and stopping all extracurricular activities. I submit to you that this harm will fall disproportionately on small and rural school districts like those I represent, like those that many of you represent. In other words an inadequate budget will inflict another layer of hurt on schools that have already endured year after year of cuts—as many as 14 consecutive years of cuts in Astoria.

Is this what we have come to in Oregon—investing less and less in education, while pouring more and more into tax breaks for big, out-of-state corporations? Is this a plan for long-term prosperity? Is this how we keep our promise of putting schools first?

I’m reminded of one of those countless sayings attributed to Abe Lincoln. “How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?” he asked. “Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.”

We do not put education first simply by saying it. Saying it doesn’t make it so. The truth lies in what we do. We break faith with the voters of Oregon when we try to make a leg out of a tail. That is why I ask for your support of the \$5.4 billion survival budget that will do no more harm to schools.