

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Vernonia has budget woes

Once again, thoughts of the City budget weigh heavily on our minds. During the recent budget meetings, City Administrator Kline stated that the city has a \$590,000 deficit (now it's a \$384,000 shortfall in the Community Development Fund and \$200,000 in needed loan reserves). Yes, that's over one half of a million dollars.

Accountability aside, it will be difficult to fund core services, such as streets, sewer, water, public safety, planning, building permits and code enforcement – as well as library, parks and the Learning Center. These are services we all need and that we pay for through taxes and use fees (like water, sewer and park fees). These fees will likely increase substantially. This will create financial hardship in many households.

In addition to fee increases, service reductions are probable. These could take the form of personnel cuts, more potholes, closed parks, less or no library or Learning Center services, and longer wait times for repair, remodel or new construction plan approvals. There is also no likelihood of hiring to replace the lost financial position nor a public works director.

Make Vernonia Shine, Friends of the Library, and Friends of the Scout Cabin are all excellent examples of this community providing for itself and expanding on available core services. This type of volunteerism might replace some services lost as a result of the budget cuts that could start to be felt starting July 1, 2007.

Another great community example of Vernonia volunteerism, helping one person at a time, is the Helping Hands ministry (see page 24 of this issue for more information). Helping Hands is a Vernonia version of an old fashioned barnraising; neighbors would come help build a barn, or a house, or help with the haying. Those helping knew they could count on being helped the next time they needed more than a couple pair of hands. On the flip-side, those helped by Helping Hands almost always want to be involved in helping the next recipient.

But, let's get back to the Budget. Any member of the public can attend budget meetings and bring along innovative ideas or just plain old opinions on how the city can cut \$590,000. The next meeting is on Wednesday, May 23, starting at 6:30 p.m. at City Hall.



Out of My Mind . . .

by Noni Andersen

When did the shepherds morph into sheep?

That question keeps waking me up at night because guidance and watchfulness are necessary for beneficial outcomes.

I'm not referring to an ovine herd, of course, but to the Vernonia mayor and city council. They no longer ask questions, they make decisions without verifiable information, sometimes with no information, and accountability has become a word with no meaning.

Example: A resident recently told Council that he was removing danger trees from his property and requested permission to remove trees from an adjacent city right-of-way at the same time. When the mayor asked if there was any discussion, only one councilor responded: Councilor Shirlee Daughtry said "It sounds appropriate to me." There was no staff report, no supporting information at all, but that didn't bother the council. Without asking a single question, everybody voted yes. The decision may have been the same with information; the point is that Council voted without information.

Example: Last year Council approved a \$25,000 loan for Learning Center operations. When the loan documents were recently reviewed they revealed that City Administrator M.R. Dick Kline and Mayor Sally Harrison used the city's only large piece of property – 20 acres that are zoned for residential use – as collateral. The details of this loan were never discussed in public. Without asking a single question every-

body voted yes.

There was a time when our mayor and city councilors considered public involvement necessary for good governance. Now they don't even want to involve themselves. Just show up, vote yes; go home.

No, it isn't quite that bad. Sometimes they discuss actions before voting.

During the meeting when the loan mentioned above was approved, Council had a lengthy discussion about whether to refund a \$25.00 deposit for a cemetery plot. The people who made the deposit many years ago, had moved and didn't plan to use it. Incidentally, they didn't ask for a refund.

So, for \$25.00, use fiscal caution. For \$25,000.00, just vote yes.

This attitude is one reason the city's budget for the coming fiscal year is quite dismal. Many are pointing the finger of blame at the previous administrator, but it was the mayor and council who hired the former director of public works for the admin position. They paid no attention to the fact that she was not qualified for the position by either education or experience. Then they followed her direction without question. When she asked them in a public council meeting to "take a risk" by approving large capital expenditures without confirmation of grant funds, they said yes. That sheep-like follow the leader, is the root of the \$384,000 shortfall.

Now they are blindly following another leader. Is that good, bad or indifferent? I don't know.

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