

Community gets flood of assistance from much wider community

By Christian Gaston of the News-Times. Reprinted by permission.

While western Washington County largely dodged the deluge of last week's storm, businesses and community groups across the region have opened their pocketbooks to provide relief to the water-logged town of Vernonia.

The Columbia County city, located north of Buxton on Highway 47, is less than 20 minutes from Banks — but it

looked more like a coastal community last Monday.

Wedged into a valley at the confluence of the Nehalem River and Rock Creek, the timber town was inundated with muddy floodwaters, putting up to 40 percent of the town's 2,340 residents under water.

On Saturday, the federal government declared Oregon's three hardest-hit counties, including Columbia County, a federal disaster area, making federal disaster assistance available to the citizens of Ver-

nonia.

Long before the federal declaration, however, truckloads of goods were being trundled up Highway 47 from western Washington County to help in the rebuilding effort.

Michelle Gilbertson, branch manager of West Coast Bank in Forest Grove, has lived in Vernonia for 19 years. She remembers the last time the city was covered in mud, in 1996.

Then, the city banded to-

duties there, but instead became drafted as interim city administrator. Howard said city administrator Dick Kline got on a plane Tuesday to honor a family commitment on the East Coast.

The task Howard inherited is staggering.

"It's going to take a while to get everything out of here," Howard said.

All of the city's schools were affected to some degree by the

packages for Vernonia.

Michael Doherty, sales manager of Doherty Ford in Forest Grove, sent a 2006 Ford F150 loaded with supplies on Wednesday and has been collecting donations at the dealership's sales office since last Friday.

"They faxed us a list of supplies that they need and we headed over Bi-Mart," said Doherty, who said his employees raided the shelves for every-



together in what was mostly a homegrown aid effort to mop up after the "100-year flood." This time around, it's a different story. As Gilbertson headed into Forest Grove Saturday, she was stunned to see a convoy of 20 big rigs heading north to her hometown.

"Everything that was coming in, it was unbelievable," Gilbertson said. "It turned the town into a traffic jam but it's helped in getting things cleaned up."

Aldie Howard, former Forest Grove planning director, headed into Vernonia on Tuesday to assume his part-time planning

flood, but the high school may be a total loss.

"The school was destroyed," Howard said. "It's just inundated with water." (While younger students are taking up temporary classrooms in a local church, high schoolers began commuting to Scappoose this week.)

By Wednesday, it was clear that the floodwaters which had threatened homes in Gales Creek and Forest Grove and made transportation tricky around Gaston were receding, and local business leaders were busy putting together care

thing from sleeping bags and knit caps to duct tape and ibuprofen. "It was a lot of the little things that you don't think about."

Doherty's crew returned but left the truck for local residents to use. "We've got a lot of long-time customers out there," Doherty said. "They had a need and we had some resources."

The Forest Grove Chamber of Commerce's holiday lighting committee put together a quick supply drive. Chamber Director Teri Koerner said the business group managed to gather a half a trailer of goods and \$700 in cash.

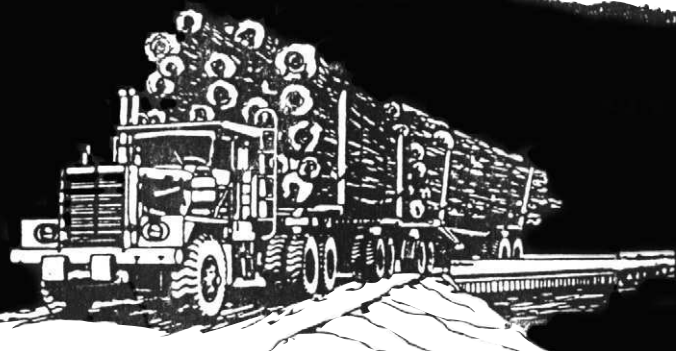
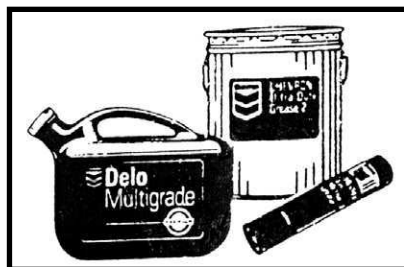
Lyle Spiesschaert drove the chamber's donations to Vernonia in a truck still decked out from the Forest Grove Holiday Light Parade. Spiesschaert said the truck rolled through town playing Christmas music, a sort of double-dose of goodwill.

"We came in just after dark
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