

Columbia County Flood Relief provides information on projects

by Jim Tierney, Director
Columbia County Flood Relief

Columbia County has received a \$500,000 Community Development Block Grant [CDBG] for elevation and repair projects in Vernonia and rural Columbia County. While these CDBG funds are not the biggest funding source, they provide essential match to the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds. FEMA typically provides only 75 percent of project costs.

According to Dan Brown, Columbia County Flood Relief's deputy director, the flood relief effort over the last 14 months has adopted a two-track approach. The first track, working primarily with volunteer labor, has been driven by our lack of available resources. Staff coordinating this part of the strategy has tracked more than 130,000 volunteer hours provided by organized volunteer groups and individual volunteers. A conservative estimate places the value of this donated labor at well over \$2 million.

More than \$350,000 in direct donations and \$120,000 in special grants have been given to the flood recovery effort. Of that, \$180,000 has been contributed to families, their projects and the city. The family donations were given for materials, and small grants for emergency living expenses. The donation to the city (\$12,500) provided essential matching money to help bring an intern from the University of Oregon. The intern will help the city plan their crucial flood recovery public works projects. The City and CCFUNC [Columbia County Flood Unmet Needs Committee] hope to complete an article on the importance of these essential projects for publication in the near future. The Unmet Needs Committee has been working hard to protect and maintain as much of the remaining fund as possible as a means to completing its second strategy.

The second strategy has been to secure large public grants that would have sufficient scale to make a significant difference for 10 or 20 times more families than could be served with the existing fund. In January of last year,

flood relief director Jim Tierney laid out a \$10 million strategy based primarily on large contributions from two public programs. The first program, FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) has somewhere between \$3 million and \$5 million available to projects in Columbia County. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program is a second source. These two funding sources are complementary; the HMGP program is larger but will only pay for 75 percent of project costs. The remaining 25 percent can in many cases be covered by the CDBG program.

Even once the funding is secured, a serious hurdle remains. Most of these grant dollars are only payable as reimbursements after the project is complete. In most construction projects, contractors are paid at least once per month. Thus, for jobs lasting more than one month, homeowners must have some kind of construction financing. Time consuming and difficult to obtain under ordinary conditions, such funding is even more difficult to obtain during the current financial crisis. It is for this need the Unmet Needs Committee has protected its resource. They will lend their funds to homeowners and be repaid from the federal reimbursements. In this way, a core of \$130,000 can be the key to financing more than \$5 million in flooded household's projects. In addition, Community Action Team has been seeking foundation support for a larger construction fund.

Who are the Col. Co. unemployed?

By Shawna Sykes, Workforce Analyst for WorkSource Oregon Employment Department

In 2008, unemployment benefits to Columbia County residents totaled approximately \$11.9 million, just over 1.2 percent of all benefits paid statewide. Historically, benefits claimed by Columbia County's residents are greater than payroll taxes collected within the county. In 2007, the amount of unemployment benefits claimed by Columbia County

Although the HMGP program is designed for flood elevations and buyouts, CDBG is not typically used for flood relief. As a consequence, program details had to be invented and examined carefully for compliance with HUD rules. This has been followed by a complicated series of contracts. In the end, County and the City of Vernonia each applied for, and expect to receive:

- \$500,000 for Columbia County elevation and repair projects
- \$500,000 for City of Vernonia elevation and repair projects
- \$500,000 for Columbia County residential buyout projects
- \$500,000 for City of Vernonia residential, rental and small business buyout projects

The development and funding of these projects, together with their extensive sets of contracts has taken much longer than the leadership of the flood recovery effort had hoped. At this point, the County elevation and repair grant is in place. The final contracts and required federal process steps for the City elevation and repair grant are being completed, now. This funding should be available within 45 days. The final details of the two buyout grants are currently being hammered out with state staff. Community Action Team (CAT) staff expect these two grants to be available in approximately 90 days.

Beginning in December 2007, more than a dozen dedicated volunteers have worked to coordinate the County flood recovery. Guided by Columbia County Commissioner Tony

residents (\$7.6 million) was over twice as great as the amount of payroll taxes paid by the county's employers (\$3.3 million.)

Multnomah, Washington, Lane, Clackamas and Marion counties received the largest amount of unemployment benefits at \$504,333,287 combined, making up over half of the state's \$954,931,369 benefits paid in Oregon in 2008.

Of the 3,104 unemployment insurance claimants residing in

Hyde, the County took the lead on this effort to protect the overtaxed government of the City of Vernonia. County leadership used a [U.S.] Department of Labor (DOL) training grant through MTC Works to hire and train many of these original volunteers to manage the projects and public resources they expected to obtain. In January of this year the DOL grant funds ran out and CAT picked up the financial and supervisory responsibility for that staff. For most of the retained staff, CAT will absorb this cost until support funding is available from the CDBG and HMGP grants. Because volunteer coordination and certain case management work done by the new CAT staff are not eligible under these grants, the Unmet Needs Committee asked the County Commission to set aside \$36,000 for CAT from their recovery funds. This money is intended to pay a portion of the 2009 salaries of three critical staff still working on CCFUNC's first strategy using volunteers.

Currently CAT Flood Recovery staff has executed contracts on the first two elevation projects with two others ready to sign contracts immediately upon funding of the first City CDBG grant. They have 27 oth-

er elevation projects at various stages of development. In addition, CAT staff has more than 20 projects slated for buyout using HMGP and CDBG funds. They expect the number of projects to increase over the next two years. CAT's Flood Recovery staff hopes to see both types of projects begin in earnest this spring. CAT staff expect progress from here on out to be limited primarily by the speed at which staff, contractors, and public supervisory staff can process the individual projects.

Beginning late last year, CAT began another flood recovery project. They purchased property on 6th Street [Avenue] in Vernonia to build four houses and rehab an existing home. These four newly constructed homes will be sold at prices affordable to families displaced by the flood. The existing home will be rented to a household also displaced by the flood.

The flood relief staff provides information and updates at their website, www.vernoniaflood.org. For more information and assistance they can be reached at 503-429-4948.

(See related article on page 1 under headline "Council given update on flood recovery plans")



NEED CASH?

America is in a GUN BUYING FRENZY!

But, with current events, the ability to sell what you have

COULD CHANGE OVERNIGHT!

GET CASH for your extra guns **NOW!**

I SOLD over **\$40,000** in guns last week alone!

Let Me Help You!!!

It's Simple, Fast and I Do All the Work!

I can help **YOU** get **TOP DOLLAR** for


Firearms, Ammo, Knives, etc.

I am a Federally Licensed Class III Firearms Dealer...

Contact me today so I can start **HELPING YOU!**



Murray Carter



503-429-0447 ~ 503-816-6556

www.cartercutlery.com ~ murray@cartercutlery.com



Please see page 20