

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Council does right thing

Vernonia, like Banks, and many other communities, has a participatory style of government. Councilors are elected, but elected from a list of people who volunteered to serve. Commissioners and committee members are all volunteers. This system works well when everyone participates, and participate they did at the Vernonia City Council public hearing on an updated sign ordinance, during the council meeting on January 19. About 25 business owners showed up and asked council not to vote on the sign ordinance, but rather to send it back to the Planning Commission so the community could have more input.

There had already been one public hearing, before the Planning Commission. Not one community member was there. Since there was no public participation, the Planning Commission had no new or different information to use, nor any reason to believe that the ordinance they put together, using the one existing from 2004, wasn't just fine. Imagine the surprise of the Planning Commissioner and Planning Director when so many showed up at council and every comment was opposed to the ordinance as written.

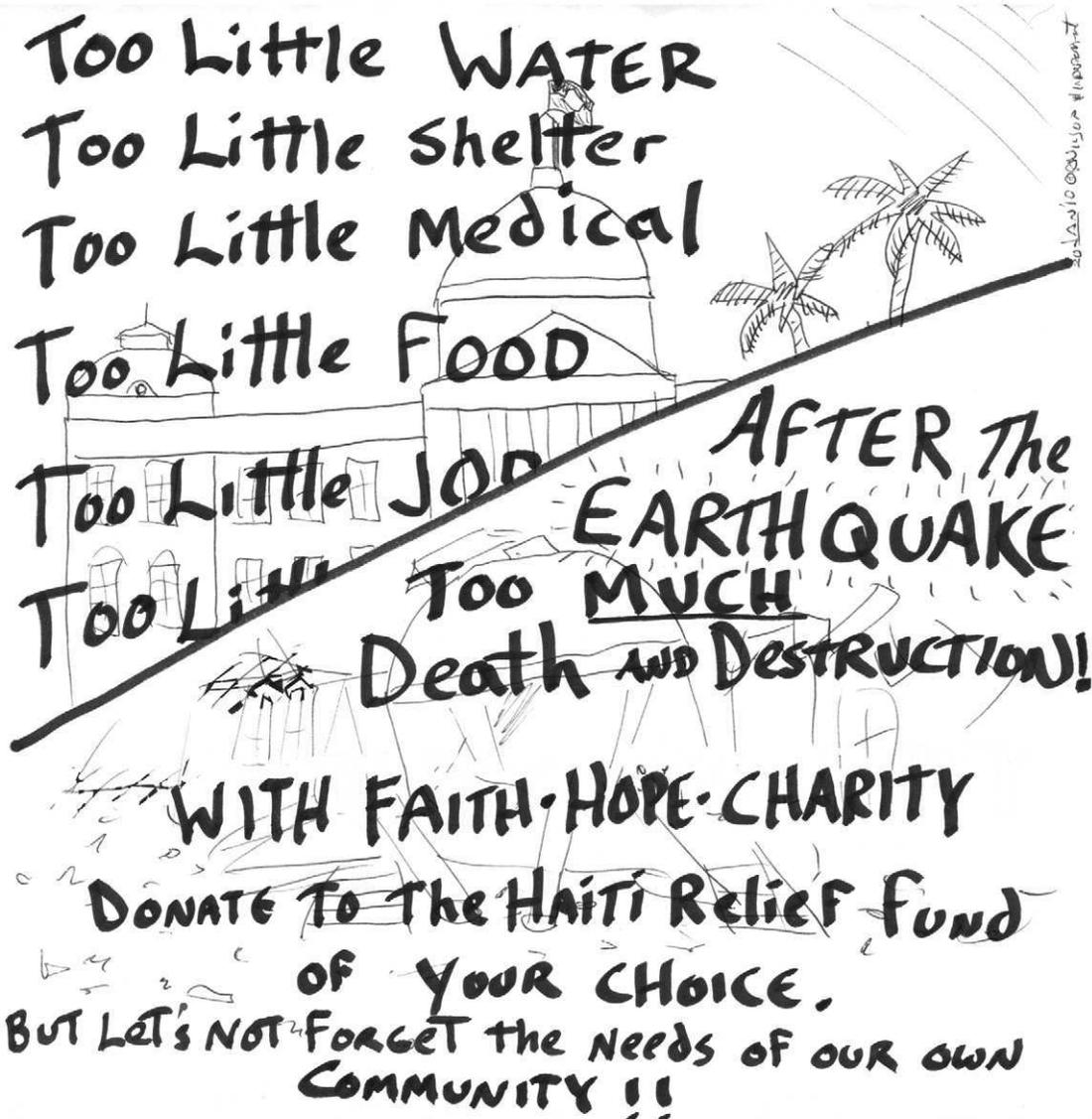
A bit of mud then got slung around. Audience said the City should do more to notify community. City (councilors and commission members) said the community has a responsibility to figure out what's going on and that the city does a fine job of notification – on the website, posted at City Hall, notices in the water bill, etc. Audience said they are trying to run businesses and don't have time to track information down; they rent so don't see water bills; that hearings aren't on nights that work. Neither side is wrong and both sides have valid concerns. We'd all get a better product from the city if we helped them know what we want and need, by participating. The city could probably find more ways to help citizens participate.

The good news is – the members of the council agreed to hold the public hearing open so the community can work with the commission to revise the ordinance to get a product that works better for both city and citizens. By the way, this ordinance is not just about downtown, it applies to all Vernonia.

City Council: Thanks for listening, thanks for making this an opportunity for more citizen participation.

Stress becoming normal?

The economy is in the dumps, and stress levels are on the rise. No jobs, housing foreclosures all around, water shutoff and electric shutoff numbers at all-time highs. Not feeling stress, great. But for those who are feeling the stress, consider talking to someone. Even a friend can listen, but there are hotline numbers on page 8, if needed.



Out of My Mind . . .

by Noni Andersen



The Yes/No fight over Ballot Measures 66 and 67 has been unusual because the arguments aren't lost among a myriad of ballot decisions, as often happens during a General Election, so campaigning has been more focused.

Typical of political battles, both sides have relied on emotional arguments and on half-truths that omit the inconvenient halves. But opponents' claim that increased taxes are needed because of increased state spending, including salary increases is astounding when most state employees are taking 15 unpaid "furlough" days. Sure, losing nearly three weeks pay is far better than losing your job, but calling that a pay increase is, shall we say, less than honest.

Additionally, the format used for state (and local) government budgets can create the appearance of increased spending when it doesn't exist. For instance, when Oregon anticipates the receipt of Federal funds, that anticipated amount must be included in the budget, whether or not it is actually received. Local governments use the same procedure when they apply for a grant.

The current state budget includes anticipated federal stimulus funds which, when added to all other state funds, make it look as though the state has increased spending. But anticipated

revenues and actual revenues are not always equal. Oregon relies heavily on a state income tax, so the unemployment caused by this recession has reduced General Fund revenues that would be used for state services.

The state's discretionary funds are mostly in the General Fund and are used primarily for education, health and human services, and public safety. Other funds have mostly dedicated uses, meaning they must be used for specific purposes. Fuel taxes, for example, must be used for specific transportation-related costs such as road and bridge construction and repair.

When the budget is developed, all *potential* revenues are included, and the expense side of the budget shows how they will be used. If the funds don't arrive, the services or projects aren't funded. Federal funds that pay part of the state's Medicaid costs will decline, as well, if less state money is spent for that purpose. So, a larger total budget isn't always what it seems to be.

In the early 1980s, a much larger tax increase protected services during a much milder recession. Are Measures 66 and 67 job killing? Over the years, Oregon's businesses have been protected, too, to the point that business taxes are third lowest in the nation. If these measures pass, they will become fifth lowest in the nation!

The increases in Measures 66 and 67, will not affect most Oregonians, but we will all be affected by less spending on education. More job losses in education will mean fewer educational opportunities for youth and more dropouts. Businesses say they want educated employees. Let's help provide them by voting yes on 66 and 67.