

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

How's justice in Vernonia?

We printed an article in the last issue comparing Municipal Courts to Justice Courts, after Vernonia Council was asked by the Police Department to switch from a Justice Court to a Municipal Court. Council was still discussing the issue at their June 7 meeting. It appears that the issue arose because the police department has complaints about the judge and the Justice Court. Without asking questions or attempting to verify the validity of the complaints by some unnamed person(s) in the police department, council asked the city administrator for a report on how to switch courts, with an analysis of benefits of one versus the other. Apparently Mayor Harrison has been working on the issue. At the June 7 meeting she mentioned having two meetings with the county on this issue, and argued with Councilor Hudson about how many times the police department had attempted to work with the court on their issues; one by her count, several by Hudson's count. No chime-in from the Police Chief.

In the meantime, Vernonia Police Department (VPD) decided to take the matter into their own hands and stopped writing citations to the Vernonia Justice Court. It has now been about six weeks since the Justice Court saw any new citations from VPD. Instead, VPD has been writing tickets to the Circuit Court in St. Helens. So, if you get a ticket for, say, not using a turn signal in Vernonia, and you want to contest it, you'll have to go to St. Helens. Beside inconveniencing citizens, the city must either pay overtime to the officer to go to St. Helens, or leave the city without police coverage while they go to court in St. Helens for a traffic ticket here. Additionally, the VPD still won't get their \$25.00 training fee because that agreement is only with the City of Vernonia. Is this an intelligent way to use our police officers? Does it make fiscal sense?

It appears that the VPD chose this route because they can't control the Judge. As one young man in town told us the other day, "If the police don't like the way the court is run, they should start their own court so they can cite who they want, convict who they want and sentence who they want." Then they wouldn't have to deal with the pesky court system we have in the United States. Police are separated from the judicial system for a very good reason. Would we expect a fair, impartial trial if police controlled the court? Look around the world, we definitely do not want a police state here. VPD needs to just enforce the law and let the Justice Court do their job – dispensing justice.

Okay, here's the score at city hall this week. Bob Young – out, Bill Haack – in, Chief Frank Grace – in until August 31, Councilor Brett Costly – in until July 1, Captain Mike Kay – in but requested and received demotion to Sergeant to gain union protection (Makes you wonder what he needs protection from this time, doesn't it?).



Out of My Mind . . .

by Noni Andersen



There will be three positions on the general election ballot for the City of Vernonia. The people who fill these positions – Mayor and two Council members – will have an impact on the future of Vernonia and all of its citizens.

It is hard to concentrate, in June, on an election that won't be held until November. However, it may be worth the effort. Perhaps the following approach can help us focus on future needs.

HELP WANTED

Mayor and two Council members for City of Vernonia.

REQUIRED: Desire and ability to learn the responsibilities and duties of municipal governance. Must be willing to attend League of Oregon Cities training sessions. Preference given for collaborative approach to community needs.

COMPENSATION: \$0.00 plus alternative satisfaction and frustration.

Currently filling the three positions are Mayor Sally Harrison, and Councilors Brett Costley and Cindy Ball. Harrison and Ball have not announced whether they plan to seek another term. Costley has resigned from the council, effective at the end of this month, so the last six months of his position will be filled by appointment. If the

person appointed wants to run for the open position, they must file nomination papers.

Vernonia is facing many difficulties, some of them because of a city council that seems to be remarkably uninterested in the sorts of details that point to probable outcomes of an action. This lack of interest has resulted in a number of negative outcomes, including way too many lawsuits that the city has lost. Other actions, or lack of action, have led to increased loss of citizen support, a sort of loss of faith that the city will do what's best for residents and businesses.

One of those actions was contracting with a private company for building permits and inspections. At that time, we were assured the service would cost no more than continuing with the county for building permits/inspections and would be more convenient. When the rates were raised above the county's rates, I asked about that assurance. Mayor Harrison responded, "We didn't say it would be forever." Following the 2007 flood, that increase made a huge difference for Vernonia residents when compared to permit/inspection charges by the county.

Downtown businesses were blind-sided by a sign ordinance that was prepared without their input; they spoke out forcefully enough that the council sent it back for changes. This month, local real estate brokers were told they *each* need to buy a business license, instead of a business license for each real estate office.

There is no doubt that the city has severe financial problems. In spite of that, council allows

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