

# catalyst

The campaign for Vernonia's schools



BOORA

## **A rural community that has persevered**

Nestled among three hills along the scenic Upper Nehalem River Valley, Vernonia, Oregon, is a rugged logging community that has overcome a lion's share of adversity throughout its rich history. Just 45 miles northwest of Portland, Vernonia has been at the center of Oregon's traditional timber industry and a bedroom community to the state's "silicon forest" high-tech industry.

In 1996, a major 500-year flood decimated much of the region. In the storm's wake, the tight-knit community of Vernonia banded together to repair and rebuild the town. The residents took great care to rebuild responsibly above the floodplain. But on December 3, 2007, heavy rains caused Rock Creek and the Nehalem River to rise again, and a second 500-year flood of historic proportions washed over Vernonia. Much of the city's public infrastructure and property were damaged or destroyed. As much as five feet of floodwater poured into the elementary school, middle school and high school, rendering them uninhabitable. The health clinic, food bank, senior center, both electrical substations, the electric cooperative's administrative offices and the waste water treatment facility were also inundated. Half of the district's 2,200 homes suffered damage, 800 of which were substantially damaged. Over 100 homes were deemed to be beyond repair.

Oregonians and the nation immediately stepped up to provide emergency assistance. State and federal agencies, Oregon nonprofits, other towns and hundreds of faith-based and service organizations launched major relief efforts to help affected families, and the town logged more than 1 million hours of volunteer aid.

## **An entire school system needs to be rebuilt**

The December 2007 flood hit Vernonia's schools particularly hard. All of the buildings were filled with tainted water from the nearby sewage facility. Since the flood, the nearly 700 students in the district have been displaced into nearby minimally repaired buildings and modular classrooms, still located in the floodplain and vulnerable each winter to another flood. With all of its schools in the new federally-designated floodplain, the cost to repair and insure these schools against future floods is prohibitively expensive and imprudent – leaving Vernonia in the unprecedented position of having to rebuild a complete kindergarten through 12th grade school district all at once.

Like many rural towns across Oregon, Vernonia's schools are the heart and soul of its community, and in many ways the glue that holds it together. As the only large gathering place in the city, the school is the town's civic center. The schools are also vital to Vernonia's economic recovery and stability, not only as the community's largest employer, but also by making it possible for families to choose to stay or to move to Vernonia. Businesses looking to locate or grow in the community require that the schools be strong.

With a collaborative public process facilitated by a Governor-appointed Oregon Solutions team, a diverse set of community leaders conducted a thorough site selection process and the development of a master plan for a new campus. On November 3, 2009 the community overwhelmingly approved a \$13 million bond to make the down payment toward the \$37 million cost to replace the three schools. At an estimated \$1.90/thousand of assessed value, the bond adds an additional burden to a community that is already grappling with so many expenses and challenges.

The full impact of this flood, as it was in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, is far more than any community can shoulder on its own. Now, with the community's commitment in place, additional resources need to be secured to ensure the new school system will open to serve the children and families of Vernonia, and to ensure the economic viability of the area. To succeed, Vernonia needs the rest of Oregon's help. As neighbors, it's our responsibility to make a difference for our hardest hit community. Together, we can establish the schools as a galvanizing hub for the town and an educational and economic development catalyst for the region.

## **An investment in creating the schools of the future**

Vernonia is not just *rebuilding* its schools. Forced by devastating circumstances to replace its entire district, Vernonia is *creating the schools for its future* by integrating green practices, creating a more vibrant community hub, planning for long-term community needs and aligning the design and educational program with advancing sustainable practices to create long-term economic opportunities. The school will be the first LEED Platinum-certified public K-12 building in the country, creating a healthier and more productive learning environment and considerably reducing long-term operating expenses.

The new Vernonia schools will be:

- Carefully located in a central, accessible and safe location high above the floodplain;
- Built for current classroom capacity and at least 30 years of projected population growth;
- Designed with "green" environmental features and indoor/outdoor spaces that provide operating cost savings and powerful learning opportunities and curricula that link to emerging Oregon economic opportunities;
- A unique-to-Oregon integrated K-12 model; and
- A case study in investing in schools as a means to catalyze rural economic development and recovery.

## **We ask you to join us**

Now it is up to us to support our neighbors in their time of need. Together with the investments of federal and state government, the generosity of the Oregon and national philanthropic communities, and the heroic efforts of the twice-flooded people of Vernonia, we can turn tragedy into triumph. We can create the schools that are the core of this community, the key to its future and a symbol of our broader Oregon values.

We have the opportunity to reestablish the heart of a historic Oregon community, and develop sustainable schools that are a model for other communities. But it can't be achieved without your help. Please join us as an investor in CATALYST: The campaign for Vernonia's schools.

### **For more information, please contact:**

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