

## Taking voters to school in Vernonia

by Nathalie Weinstein

Published: October 29th, 2009



Boora Architects designed the K-12 school that Vernonia School District hopes to build. (Rendering courtesy of Boora Architects)

The Vernonia School District expects voters next week to pass a \$13 million bond to help pay for construction of a new \$37 million LEED-platinum school outside the flood plain where high waters destroyed one district school and damaged two others in 2007. But that money will pay for only one-third of the project, and the district is working feverishly to identify funding sources to fill the \$24 million gap.

"Once the bond passes, we will begin in earnest to work with federal and state agencies to find funding," district superintendent Kenneth Cox said. "When we did polling a month ago, there was a 74-percent approval rate for the bond measure."

If the bond passes on Tuesday, the \$13 million would help cover costs to construct and furnish the new K-12 building, designed by Boora Architects of Portland. The district has been working with Oregon Solutions, a group that helps communities partner with other organizations to develop sustainable projects.

So far, the district's plan for raising the remaining funds is threefold: applying for stimulus funding through federal and state governments, securing private donations and conducting a capital campaign.

"In this time of stimulus funding, we have to go out for this bond," said Sharon Bernal, school bond campaign committee chairwoman. "We're not going to have this opportunity for federal funding again."

But the district won't know how much stimulus funding will be available for the school replacement project until after Sen. Betsy Johnson meets with Gov. Ted Kulongoski's office next month. Johnson has been working with the district and the Oregon Solutions team to identify funding to replace the district's damaged facilities.

"We have a meeting with the governor's office on Nov. 10," said Johnson, D-Scappoose. "That meeting will begin the conversation on what money can be used in Vernonia."

"The governor has no discretionary dollars at his fingertips for projects, but there are opportunities available through the state's stimulus funds, and also competitive opportunities through the federal stimulus," said Courtney Warner Crowell, communications manager for the governor's economic recovery team. "I can't comment on how much money would be available."

Adding to the urgency of building the new school is dwindling enrollment; the district has lost about 100 students since the flood because of families moving into other districts with better school facilities. For each student enrolled in a district, the state pays the district \$6,000; so, the Vernonia School District has lost approximately \$600,000 in funding.

"The students have gone to schools in other districts, and some families moved away," Bernal said. "But when I ask those parents, 'Would you bring your kids back if we had a new school?' they say yes."

The district's high school was demolished in September 2008, displacing students into temporary modular buildings without lockers, hallways or common areas. To get to the high school's only remaining building, the gym, students have to walk about two blocks.

Vernonia Middle School and Washington Grade School remain standing, but the district cannot afford to insure those buildings, which lie in a flood plain, according to Cox.

"It would take a quarter-million dollars to insure one building for \$1 million for one year," said Cox. "The insurance costs have increased tenfold at least over the last few years."

The last time the district proposed a bond measure was in 2001, and it failed by 250 votes. The district will need 800 total votes to pass its current bond. But Bernal is confident that the community will support the building project.

"We're not just going to build a school," said Bernal. "We're building a sustainable school that will be around for the next 100 years."

"I'm hoping all of Oregon will look at us and think, 'These people are pretty resilient.' "

Complete URL: <http://djcoregon.com/news/2009/10/29/taking-voters-to-school/>