

Vernonia moves out of FEMA trailers

By [Lisa Lednicer, The Oregonian](#) October 08, 2009, 6:28PM



Dan Wilmont (left) and Rob Wilson help their friend David Herndon move out of Trailer 1 on Thursday. Herndon, displaced by the December 2007 flood that inundated Vernonia, has been living in a government-issued trailer since April 2008. He is moving to Buxton.

VERNONIA – Moving day on the corner of [Rose Avenue and Maple Street](#): The Archers pack up the deep freeze, the basketball hoop, the lizard enclosure and the washing machine. After 18 months of living in a government-issued trailer, they're going home.

Actually, they're moving into another trailer – their own. Their house, inundated by floodwater nearly two years ago, still isn't fit to live in.



Cami Archer and her son, Adrian, 5, prepare to leave their government-issued trailer Thursday. They're moving into another trailer, this time next to their house that flooded during the December 2007 storm. Archer's husband, Nick, estimates they have a few weeks of work left to do on the home before they'll be able to move back in."

It's kind of bittersweet," said Cami Archer, 24, unloading the refrigerator while two of her children toddled nearby. "I would have liked to go right into the house. I try to stay positive about it, that we have a home and we're not losing it."

Thursday was the deadline for the displaced victims of the December 2007 storm to leave the trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The original deadline had been June 8, but FEMA granted an extension at the request of U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

On Thursday, a FEMA official walked through the gravel lot inspecting each of the 22 trailers, almost all of which were empty. Abandoned satellite T.V. dishes lay next to large trash bins overflowing with trash.

All 11 families that remained in the last few weeks have found other housing arrangements. Some are less than optimal: One resident, a school board member, is living in a local park while he waits to receive a government buyout of his house. Others are staying with relatives, living in trailers donated by the Lions Club, or returning to their repaired or almost-repaired homes.

Those in the midst of moving said they were frustrated with the bureaucracy involved in getting compensation for their ruined homes. FEMA reimburses homeowners 75 percent of the pre-flood assessed value, but local officials still are awaiting an additional \$1 million in grant money to help pay the rest.

Scott Stevens, a carpenter and musician, lived in a gas station he had converted to a carpentry shop and house. The flood sent 50 inches of water through the place, which is near the Nehalem River. Stevens moved into a FEMA trailer in May 2008 while he waited for a buyout.

But the process gummed up when testing revealed gasoline in the ground at his home. State environmental officials say he needs to clean it up; he says he lacks the \$20,000 it would take.

He said he wishes he had spent the last few months fixing up his house instead of hoping the government would buy his property.

"I'm angry at myself that I let them put me in this position," he said. "I can build a house from the ground up. All this time I could have built my home and been in it."

The home to which he's returning is crowded and cold. The couches, tables and chairs he bought at post-flood rummage sales still need arranging. Abandoned cats prowl his property. The storm damaged one of his carpentry machines, but he can still make it work.

"It's a nightmare," Stevens said.

Why not just leave? "I'm getting really tempted," he said. "But my property won't go away. If I leave, they'll just take it."



So the removal of the trailers is one more tangible bit of evidence that residents have moved on. Almost.

Vernonia residents finally said goodbye on Thursday to the FEMA-issued trailers that housed many of them following a December 2007 flood that inundated the town. Life returned to normal months ago in this town of 2,300. But a flood relief office is expected to operate until at least 2011. An "unmet needs" committee, formed to guide residents through paperwork and coordinate donations, still meets to discuss hardship cases. And next month, residents will be asked to vote for a \$13 million bond to help rebuild the town's elementary, middle and high schools above the flood plain.

"To the individuals involved, there may still be frustration," said Dan Brown, one of the leaders in the flood recovery efforts. "I'd like to think as a community, we're entering a new phase."

-- [Lisa Grace Lednicer](#)