



Finding answers for 'Our Town'

If an Oregon Solution can be found for Vernonia, it could be applied to other towns in similar predicaments

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VERNONIA If you've visited Vernonia (population 2,275), you know it's an Oregon version of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." There's even a cemetery perched above it, doubling as a park, viewpoint and lover's lane. A few flat-topped gravestones do rough duty as park benches.

Like "Our Town," Vernonia is a heartbreakingly beautiful place to grow up. But last year's flood raises doubts about how many kids will have that chance. For the second time in 11 years, the flood damaged the city's core, including its schools. Families fled and, almost immediately, the Vernonia School District started losing students.

Now Vernonia must move its schools well above the flood plain, ideally nearer to that lovely cemetery on the hill. The cost, though, is a staggering \$35 million to \$50 million. There is no question it will take substantial outside help, along with a sizable commitment from townspeople themselves.

Fortunately, they realize moving the schools to higher ground is a life-or-death proposition for their town. As The Oregonian's Mark Larabee reported recently, they've rallied behind School Superintendent Ken Cox, even though many are still dealing with devastation in their own homes.

Fortunately, too, Gov. Ted Kulongoski has taken a personal interest in rebuilding Vernonia. Recently, he named Vernonia schools as an Oregon Solutions project. Originally based in the governor's office but now run by the National Policy Consensus Center at Portland State, the program brings leaders of nonprofits, businesses and every level of government together to hammer out a "declaration of cooperation." They plot the best way forward out of what can seem like an impossible situation.

The Oregon Solutions team met in Vernonia last week. Co-conveners, named by Kulongoski, are Tony Hyde, a Columbia County commissioner who has worked indefatigably for Vernonia since the flood, and Tom Kelly, president of the Neil Kelly remodeling company.

Up to this point, the Oregon congressional delegation has certainly been involved. But now Sen. Gordon Smith and Sen. Ron Wyden, along with Rep. David Wu, will need to come through in a big way for the town. Federal help will be essential.

If they deliver, if Kulongoski keeps up his pressure and focus, and if Vernonia residents themselves are unwavering and coalesce behind a plan, there's every reason to think this community can fully recover. It can reinvent itself, once again, as a dream hometown. Without fully functioning schools, there isn't much growing up to be done, and not much growing period for any city, big or small.

All over Oregon, small communities are having trouble keeping going and larger ones are having trouble keeping their schools going. They may not have suffered flood damage, but they're headed in what you might call a rest-in-peace direction. Oregon simply cannot sit back and let that downward spiral continue.

It will no doubt be painful and difficult going forward in Vernonia. But finding an Oregon Solution in this place is of paramount importance.

This is Our Town. Lessons learned here could be applied to struggling communities across our entire state.