



The Oregonian

Vernonia needs an Oregon Solution

To rebuild schools at a higher level, the city badly needs a higher level of help from the feds

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Nobody died. Look on the bright side. That's what people in Vernonia keep reminding themselves in the wake of December's devastating flood, the city's second in 11 years.

Or, as the signs framed, sampler-style, behind Vernonia school Superintendent Ken Cox's desk remind him: "Be thankful for what you have" . . . Because "There are no shortcuts to anyplace you're going."

Cox is thankful for the generosity of Oregonians and for Vernonia's resilience. But he also knows his school district has got to find a shortcut, and fast. It's urgently in need of state and federal assistance to relocate its elementary, middle and high schools to higher ground. What he has right now is a hollowed-out high school, a devastated gym and other damaged buildings; demoralized students, many occupying a fleet of portables; and distracted parents, dealing with flood damage in their own homes.

Already, enrollment has dipped by 8 percent as families flee or move elsewhere to bunk in "temporarily" with relatives. Some may return, but few will have reason to if the schools aren't rebuilt. Although repairs are theoretically possible, it would be foolish to invest much in repairing buildings in a flood plain in a twice-flooded town almost certain to flood again.

Fortunately, sites at higher ground are available. But the cost of rebuilding the schools is daunting, estimated at \$40 million. The state would have to help by cutting through red tape and coming up with a portion of the money. Vernonia voters certainly would have to help, too, by approving a bond measure as a kind of local match.

An emergency federal appropriation also would be critical. This is a real test of leadership for Sens. Ron Wyden and Gordon Smith, along with Rep. David Wu. They all need to come through for Vernonia.

As in many smaller Oregon communities, the schools are synonymous with the town, not only the largest employer, but also the only place for the community to gather in the event of a disaster. All the more reason to relocate the schools before, God forbid, another flood.

The best thing that could happen this week would be for Gov. Ted Kulongoski to select Vernonia schools as a project for Oregon Solutions. The Portland State University program brings local, state and federal government officials, foundations and the private sector together to collaborate on problems.

In Vernonia's case, the problems are so overwhelming that it's hard to know where to begin. But Cox has the right idea:

Begin with what this community is most grateful for and can't live without: Its schools.

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