



Vernonia Schools-Oregon Solutions Steering Committee
Vernonia Community Learning Center
February 23, 2010
Minutes

Attendees: Glenn Ahrens (OSU Extension Service), Rita Bernhard (Columbia County Commissioner), Sharon Bernal (VEDC), Dan Brown (Vernonia Planning Commission), Chip Bubl (OSU Extension Service), Dr. Ken Cox (VSD Superintendent), John Donovan (Metropolitan Group), Mark Ellsworth, (Governor Kulongoski's ERT), Earl Fisher (Columbia County Commissioner), Fritz Graham by phone (Sen. Wyden's office), Amy Grotta (OSU Extension Service), Bill Haack (Col-PAC), Sally Harrison (Mayor of Vernonia), Tony Hyde (co-convenor and Columbia County Commissioner), Alissa Keny-Guyer (Oregon Solutions), Greg Kintz (VSD School Board), Jim Krahn (VSD Board Chair), Scott Laird (Vernonia's Voice), Heather Lewis (Vernonia Chamber of Commerce), Gayle Lee (IBEW Local 48), Pricilla Lewis (Providence), Kelly Marks (PCC), Betsy Miller (VSD), Marilyn Nicks (Vernonia Chamber Board), DeAnna Pearl (Vernonia Prevention Coalition), Mike Pihl (Pihl Logging), Dawn Plews (VSD Business Manager), Mark Siegel (Sen. Merkely's office), Gordon Smith (Vernonia Sentry), Debbie Snook (Vernonia Health Board), Katy Stevens (VHS student), Danny Vandersheldon (VHS Student), Kim Wallace (Vernonia School Board), Donna Webb (Vernonia Chamber of Commerce), Bob Young (Vernonia City Administrator)

Welcome & Introductions:

Alissa Keny-Guyer

Community Projects Update:

Bob Young, Bill Haack, Sharon Bernal

Mike Pihl – Axe Man: After hearing more about the school project from the Feb 16th Economic Development forum, Pihl asked producers of The History Channel's Axe Man television show to assist with the fundraising efforts. He asked that a part of the show be devoted to the Schools' cause, which would reach a wide audience.

Bob Young reported that he and consultant Paul Cook are working on a strategic plan for Vernonia. The schools are foremost in the future direction of the community. The City is helping WOEC building a new headquarters. Rose Ave. update: The City is working to obtain 2.5 acres from Oregon Parks Department and within 2 weeks will have land for a new senior center, health clinic and food bank outside the flood plain. The City still owns property in middle of school property. City and VSD will work together to resolve this issue.

Sharon Bernal reported on the successful Feb 16th Vernonia Economic Development Committee (VEDC) meeting, which was attended by dozens. A panel from VSD and Oregon Solutions gave a positive progress report on the school rebuilding effort and discussed areas of economic development that intersect both the school and community—like the Natural Resources Center and Catherine Mater’s proposals (discussed more below). VSD is trying to keep local citizens involved and enthused with the rebuilding project; VEDC is trying to involve the community with economic development projects and recruit businesses into Vernonia.

Vernonia Mayor Harrison reported on the downtown revitalization project – looking forward to public involvement. The City Council, VEDC and VSD are working together on economic development.

Bill Haack reported that Catherine Mater, OSU Department of Engineering Director of Sustainability and Senior Fellow at Pinchot Institute for Conservation, is proposing that Vernonia become a pilot “anchor community” for sustainable economic development. She is exploring the idea through the Oregon Solutions schools team, VEDC, City Council, the health clinic advisory board and other entities. So far there has been great enthusiasm, since the Pinchot Institute could bring national resources for economic development opportunities, including a small energy plant connected to school. She is exploring using the wood by-products of timber harvesting and to heat the schools and some buildings in City. Catherine’s work is on the cutting edge; she has her own engineering firm and is well connected within industry. This new project could set standards in Vernonia and change the paradigm for a timber town. Bill, Tony Hyde and many others are excited about the opportunities.

School Project Update:

Dr. Ken Cox

Ken Cox reported on the Spencer park transfer, wetlands, value engineering, etc. The estimated costs of some project components have increased—like land acquisition, campaign costs, bond issuance costs and interest payments. However the recent value engineering by our architects have reduced construction costs by \$2-3 million, leaving roughly the same \$37 million total project cost. Updates will be provided at a town hall meeting Feb. 25, 7pm – 8:30pm in the VHS cafeteria.

Following up on a suggestion made at the VEDC Forum a week ago, VSD placed posters around town with tear-offs for citizens to turn in to VSD for public comment. Thanks to the merchants for facilitating that effort. We want to be very inclusive and informational. See www.vernoniaschools.org for twice weekly blogs.

Private Sector Fundraising:

Tony Hyde, John Donovan

Several Oregon Solutions members attended the Portland downtown Rotary Club lunch today, at which Tom Kelly introduced the project through a power point presentation to about 200 business leaders. VHS senior Katy Stevens recounted her experience during and since the flood. Tom Kelly announced that NW Natural committed \$100K and Anne Kilkenny from Winks Hardware pledged \$50K. The presentation was very moving, and several business representatives offered their help at the end of it. Tom deserves tremendous thanks for his commitment to this project over the past two years and especially over the last month, during which he has been to several solicitation meetings with businesses and foundations. Several Oregon Solutions team members will also attend the Volunteers of America gala tomorrow night, when Tom will be awarded for his volunteerism.

In addition to producing the Power Point presentation, Metropolitan Group filmed video last week in Vernonia with Tony Hyde, students and other school and business representatives. The Fundraising video will be used when potential donors cannot come out to Vernonia. NW Natural has offered to help facilitate communication and storytelling and offered their corporate network to connect businesses for fundraising. John hopes to have the video ready by next steering committee meeting. Dr. Kox will post project updates on www.vernoniaschools.org.

Recent meetings with foundations include: The Ford family Foundation (TFFF), Meyer Memorial Trust, Collins Foundation and Oregon Community Foundation. All expressed a strong interest and asked for project representatives to come back. TFFF and Oregon Solutions will co-host a March gathering of leading foundations to discuss philanthropic involvement in this project.

John Donovan explained that we are just completing the “campaign readiness” phase and starting the “cultivation” and “solicitation” phases. Usually you let people know about the project and later ask them to help—but we are already getting some donations more quickly than anticipated. Despite the strong early results for each of three levels: foundations, businesses and the public sector, we have a long way to go.

Mayor Harrison reported that the Alumni and Friends of Vernonia Schools will hold “Vernonia’s Largest Class Reunion” on Sunday, August 15. All VSD friends and classmates will be invited. The group would like to have bus service to new site. The mayor will seek publicity. She invites people to join the planning!

Alumni and Friends would like to sell square footage of the new building for \$250/square foot. The group is hoping that local businesses will do displays of former classes. VSD School Board Greg Kintz reported that the Alumni and Friends of Vernonia Schools is on Face Book! Alum are finding it and are interested.

Alissa Keny-Guyer reported that at the last Steering Committee meeting, several people said that they have a connection with others. Joe Esmonde followed up by asking his Intel contact about sponsoring a science lab at the resource center. Alissa also thanked the entire Columbia County Board of Commissioners for attending this Steering Committee meeting - it says a lot about their commitment to Vernonia.

VHS Student Katy Stevens reported that she appreciates the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Vernonia community and will continue to be involved. Students will be meeting with VHS history teacher Byron Brown to discuss how they can help.

Bond and Bridge Financing:

Dr. Ken Cox, Dawn Plews

The school is looking to issue premium tax-exempt bonds in order to start construction this summer. We need some pledges before selling the bonds to ensure the project can be completed. The Bridge Finance Committee is working hard to develop several options for borrowing.

Federal:

Commissioner Hyde, Dr. Ken Cox

Mark Siegel was welcomed as Senator Merkley’s new representative on our team. Fritz Graham from Sen. Wyden’s office is listening in by phone today. Tony Hyde leaves for Washington DC this weekend for a 10-day visit. Ken spent a week in DC –in the snowstorm! Ken met with Ball Janik lobbyist Nora Bomar-Khalil in DC; she packaged all “sustainable design” appropriations requests together for \$1.4 million total – and submitted them to Wu and Wyden. We estimate we will receive a third of that, which would be more than we’ve receive annually over the last 2 years. Our lobbyist is keeping us aware of program money available in the federal budget and how to access it. The best case scenario is \$1.5million over three years.

John Donovan reported that Metropolitan Group is pleased and impressed with Ball Janik with level of response and guidance received. Tony Hyde commented that he is still planning on a bike ride with Sen. Merkley. Tom Kelly has said that Earl Blumenauer wants to meet with us.

County:

Commissioner Hyde

On March 2, Columbia County conducts its annual needs and issues process – Tony Hyde said that someone from school district should attend. The goal is to decide what are the priority community projects over the next year. VSD project needs to be among the top priorities. From philanthropic standpoint, VSD needs to make the case that it is the number one project. City council passed a resolution that VSD project is number one priority for the City.

FEMA Waiver:

Bill Haack, Dr. Ken Cox

FEMA alerted us that Flood Mitigation Assistance funds unused from North Dakota are available and must be expended this fiscal year or be reallocated. Sen. Betsy Johnson (absent today because of the Special Session) met with FEMA reps last month regarding our request for a waiver on the cap on FEMA dollars spent per community per flood. If waived, a potential multi-million dollar pledge from FEMA to reimburse partial costs after the old schools have been removed would facilitate bridge financing. The waiver request is in process in DC and should be reviewed within 30 days. Region 10 is 100% supportive of the waiver. If approved, there are four parts to the application: appraisal of the pre-flood school buildings, benefit cost analysis, deduction of duplication of benefits insurance, and determination of net value; FEMA will pay up to 75% of value. Dan Brown said the benefit cost analysis has been started. All signs are good we will receive the FEMA waiver and funding.

Oregon Natural Resources Institute

Glenn Ahrens

OSU Extension agent Glenn Ahrens is working with fellow extension agents Amy Grotta and Chip Bubl (all here today) and Catherine Mater around concepts for the “Vernonia Natural Resource Center” (as he calls it, since we don’t have an official name yet). It is a stand-alone building on the school campus. With two full scale research development labs and shops in addition to the high school science labs, it has a chance of securing funds as an economic development project. His OSU contingent and community colleges have asked, “What should the lab be, where can we find the ready-made projects, and how will they be maintained over the long-run?” Possible research topics include forest management, biomass in wood forest products, wood natural resources and sustainability. There have been talks with federal contacts regarding biomass energy and wood by-products, management of lands

around school, community engagement and health regarding natural resources around Vernonia. Language regarding the definition and purpose of the Center is broad and vague – we are working on details to make sure this facility is what Vernonia wants, can use and can sustain. OSU has the technical resources and there is possible funding to help VSD if it wants to implement biomass heating for the whole school from the start. More planning needs to be done on: local economic development desired outcomes, operating costs, endowments, sponsors and grants. Also critical is the natural resource education – tying the research to VHS science and other curriculum because student success is critical and integral to project.

Jim Krahn noted that funding of OSU Extension is often in jeopardy; it is a useful, vital service, so please tell legislators that extension service is needed. Our collaboration with community colleges (PCC has been at the table from day one), state schools and public schools is a pilot project for other communities.

State Updates:

Mark Ellsworth

Mark Ellsworth thanked Columbia County Commissioners for being part of process. On the State side things are moving forward. Mark Ellsworth is working on an Executive Order from the Governor to state agencies to help cut through red tape to seek resources for this project and promote interagency coordination. Alissa reported that Oregon Department of Energy will help figure out how to break through barriers when applying for funds for the green aspects. Mitigation flood issues community-wide (not just school related) are still being discussed. With a funding gap of \$185 million in the legislature this year, no funds were available for a Vernonia Schools appropriations or lottery bond, but Senator Betsy Johnson said there maybe opportunities in next year's regular session.

Next Steps:

Commissioner Hyde

The group decided to postpone the next steering committee meeting to **MARCH 30, 1-3pm**, since the 4th Tuesday falls during spring break.

Adjourned: 4:04pm