

## 'Oregon's New Orleans' reaches out for help

**By The Oregonian Editorial Board**

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Through two natural disasters, Vernonia has been the little Oregon town that could.

First came the 500-year flood of February 1996. The isolated Columbia County community 40 miles northwest of Portland was almost entirely cut off by washouts, and more than 2,000 residents had to leave their homes.

Most returned and rebuilt, however, only to be struck by another, even worse flood in December 2007. It destroyed Vernonia's schools, water and sewer systems and much of the community's housing.

Almost two years after that disaster, the resilient town is still fighting to come back. It has had plenty of help from the people of Oregon and the federal government, but it's going to take even more such help to get this community back on its feet.

Columbia County and Vernonia leaders correctly see that rebuilding the schools is key to the community's survival. Not only are schools the largest employer in town, but they're also essential to keeping families from moving away to districts with facilities far superior to the 22 temporary modular classrooms now serving Vernonia's 622 kids.

Thus the school district has developed plans for a \$37 million new K-12 school on higher ground, safe from the next flood. In a Nov. 3 election, Vernonia voters are being asked to help pay for the new facilities by approving a \$13 million bond.

But what about the remaining \$24 million? Here's where the Vernonia project becomes unusual and possibly unprecedented: The community is asking for state, federal and philanthropic help to raise that balance.

The fund-raising push is the product of a program called Oregon Solutions. Convened for Vernonia by Gov. Ted Kulongoski, the program puts business, government and community leaders to work on finding the best way forward on seemingly intractable situations.

Rebuilding Vernonia schools certainly fits that definition. Raising the additional \$24 million seems like a stretch at a time when all of Oregon is struggling to recover from the recession.

But leaders of the community and their backers say they've already got \$5 million in commitments from two private foundations. They say they've also received pledges of support from key state and federal lawmakers, so perhaps they can pull this off.

Vernonia's plea for help is certainly extraordinary, but this is a community facing extraordinary circumstances -- "Oregon's New Orleans," as advocates describe it.

If voters there approve the school bond, Oregon's legislature and congressional delegation should look for ways to secure public funds to help supplement it. Meanwhile, all Oregonians, businesses and foundations should consider contributing whatever they can, too.

And first, of course, voters in the Vernonia School District must earn this broad support by passing that bond issue in the Nov. 3 election.



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

December 2007 floodwaters surround the Vernonia home of Nancy Schaumburg on Hemlock Lane.