

1-1-2008

## Vernonia 2020 Vision: A Plan for the Future

Mathew Berkow  
*Portland State University*

Maria Ellis  
*Portland State University*

Oren Eshel  
*Portland State University*

Harleen Kaur  
*Portland State University*

Terra Lingley  
*Portland State University*

*See next page for additional authors*

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp\\_murp](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_murp)

 Part of the [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Berkow, Mathew; Ellis, Maria; Eshel, Oren; Kaur, Harleen; Lingley, Terra; Maher, Colin; Shackman, Stephen; Tipper, Ariana; and Zaninovich, George, "Vernonia 2020 Vision: A Plan for the Future" (2008). *Master of Urban and Regional Planning Workshop Projects*. Paper 36.

[http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp\\_murp/36](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_murp/36)

This Report is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Urban and Regional Planning Workshop Projects by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

---

**Authors**

Mathew Berkow, Maria Ellis, Oren Eshel, Harleen Kaur, Terra Lingley, Colin Maher, Stephen Shackman, Ariana Tipper, and George Zaninovich

*“Now is the time to think outside of the box.... Dream big. There is tremendous opportunity.”*



# { Vernonia 2020 Vision

*A plan for the future*



# { Vernonia 2020 Vision

*a plan for the future*

Produced by Bridges Planning Group, Portland State University  
Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning  
Planning Workshop, Master of Urban and Regional Planning  
on behalf of the City of Vernonia  
June 2008





## **Vernonia, Oregon – early morning January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

*Rain falls on Douglas firs perched on hilltops, looking down into the Upper Nehalem Valley and the confluence of Rock Creek and the Nehalem River. The waterways are swollen and seem to be rising as the morning turns from black to grey. The fields where the schools used to be are waterlogged wetlands, like a towel tub-side diverting the splashing overflow from spilling into town. Buildings and houses are set back from the river banks, and as the water rises it flows into the lowlands. These riparian areas will soak up the excess and keep the town safe. Smoke winds upwards out of chimneys, toward the treetops and the saturated sky. The town sleeps.*

*Just outside of Vernonia's downtown a few blocks off Bridge Street, where the cafes and bakeries are enticing the early risers with the scent of black brewed coffee and warm cinnamon buns, fluorescent lights beam out of the wall-sized windows of the new school's common space. A young teacher, who just moved to Vernonia with his wife and daughter to teach the renewable energy unit of the high-school science curriculum, is working out the kinks of the wind-energy storage system to be built with a group of seniors. He walks to the windows and stands staring, hands on his hips pondering the decision to relocate his family to Vernonia. The school, the downtown, the people, the commitment to the community's future leads to thoughts of his daughter sleeping soundly, securely beyond his reflection in the glass. This is her town, her future.*

*He focuses his eyes on the world around him, up at the hills. The trees are swaying in the storm while the turbines turn. He smiles, shuts off the lights, locks the door behind him and heads back home to pick up his family and go get breakfast on Bridge Street. The rain pours.*

**Prepared for City of Vernonia**

Client Representatives

Aldie Howard, Interim City Administrator

Jessica Jones

**Prepared by Bridges Planning Group**

Portland State University, Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning

Mathew Berkow

Maria Ellis

Oren Eshel

Harleen Kaur

Terra Lingley

Colin Maher

Stephen Shackman

Ariana Tipper

George Zaninovich

**Faculty Advisers**

Portland State University, Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning

Sy Adler

Ethan Seltzer



# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction .....	4
Vernonia: A timeline .....	7
Vernonia Then and Now.....	11
Planning Process.....	15
Community Priorities .....	21
Long Term Priority .....	22
Short Term Priority.....	28
Implementation .....	36
Appendices.....	43
A: Teen Focus Groups and Suggested Facilities for Youth ....	44
B: Process Narrative .....	46
C: Tier 2 Priorities .....	47
D: Community Involvement Map.....	49
E: New School Criteria Development .....	50
F: Community Priority Development .....	51
References.....	52
Credits.....	53



天  
皇  
天  
皇  
天  
皇  
天

# Executive Summary



The Vernonia 2020 Vision Plan was an endeavor by the City of Vernonia to involve citizens in long-term resiliency planning and visioning to complement the short-term recovery effort following a 500-year flood in December 2007. Bridges Planning Group (BPG), from Portland State University's School of Urban Studies and Planning, facilitated the process, over the course of which residents identified the highest-priority barriers to resiliency and past and present efforts to overcome these barriers.

Post-flood Vernonia faces economic, social and environmental challenges which raise concerns about the town's future. As with previous floods, the capacity to address these challenges exists within local organizations and the initiative of current residents. In addressing these conditions, the recommended actions of this plan share two common themes:

- \* **Successful implementation** of projects identified as needs during the visioning process **builds confidence** in Vernonia's future
- \* **Vernonia is better** when residents, organizations and the local government **work together**

## { Vernonia 2020 Vision

Through five community meetings, five stakeholder meetings, discussions, focus groups, personal interviews, brainstorming sessions, and informal meetings, citizens and stakeholders were asked to articulate and refine a vision for a resilient Vernonia in 12 years. From this process, key elements necessary to realize the vision for Vernonia in 2020 are:

- \* Maintaining **rural character**
- \* Attracting **young families**
- \* Cultivating a **community culture and employment base** that attracts not only visitors but potential new residents

# { Recommended Strategies

To facilitate the sharing of information and advise the visioning process, the City of Vernonia and BPG assembled a stakeholder group called the Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC), consisting of community and local organization leaders.

During the visioning process, BPG asked the community to look forward to the year 2020 and imagine a preferred vision for Vernonia. Meeting participants prioritized ideas and identified challenges to the implementation of this vision. From the top priorities that emerged in the citizen involvement process, BPG and ARC identified two priorities that were not already being significantly addressed by local organizations or government, referred to as “Tier 1” priorities in this document:

- \* Developing **community facilities** and **places for teens**
- \* Stimulating **economic development** and creating jobs locally

For these priorities, BPG analyzed local Vernonia resources, national best practices and input from Vernonia residents to develop a list of projects and strategies that can be successfully implemented by the community. As with a community barn-raising, these projects are intended to build confidence and cooperation. This document recommends implementing the following projects:

## Creating youth-oriented facilities

- \* Building an **outdoor amphitheater**
- \* Creating a **teen lounge**

## Economic development

- \* Providing **business development and management assistance**
- \* **Marketing Vernonia** to residents and to consumers throughout Oregon
- \* **Plugging the leaks:** capture resident spending in the local economy

The community identified protecting Vernonia against flooding and reducing utility rates as high priorities for ensuring the resiliency of Vernonia. BPG and ARC classified these items as “Tier 2” priorities, given that they were largely being addressed by the responsible agencies. For further discussion of Tier 2 priorities please refer to Appendix C.



## Implementation

linking vision to action

In order to promote the cooperation and participation needed to implement the Vernonia 2020 Vision, this document recommends:

- \* Foster cooperation through the Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC)
- \* Forming a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC)
- \* Reviving a Business Assistance Team (BAT)

# Introduction

## { A Vision for Vernonia



Hope, optimism, and initiative are traits that define Vernonia, a former timber town nestled in the forests between Portland and the Coast Range, and its 2,300 residents. It is a resilient place with people who continually harness the rugged, independent spirit upon which Vernonia was founded to face challenges head-on and **work together** to make their community better than it was before.

The strength of Vernonia is currently being tested. The town survived two ‘500-year’ floods in the last eleven years. The most recent, in December 2007, left several important community assets inoperable, including the elementary, middle and high schools, the electrical substation, the senior center, and the food bank. Twenty five percent of the housing stock was severely damaged and hundreds of residents were displaced. This was a tremendous hit to the community, where nearly 60 percent of residents lived below the low-moderate income level before the waters rose. As a consequence, there were rumblings that the town was on its way to being a relic of a resource-based economy. Why rebuild? Why not raze? Why not just relocate?

In addition to the environmental and economic challenges, Vernonia struggles to sustain consistent leadership. There has been a revolving door of nine city managers over the last 12 years and some people believe that local government decisions are made behind closed doors. Furthermore, consensus among citizens was lacking about what should be done, by whom and how.

The flood is as a catalyst, motivating the community to come together to plan for a safer, stronger and more vibrant Vernonia. Citizens, and the City of Vernonia utilized a planning process to look 12 years into the future at what their community could be. The process intended to get people talking about what they want for the future, involve community leaders in the discussion, and to create a plan that is doable and reflects community’s desires. Through a comprehensive citizen involvement effort implemented by Bridges Planning Group, the Vernonia 2020 Vision was created – a future snapshot of a resilient, sustainable Vernonia that includes new state-of-the-art schools, adequate spaces for young adults and an economic development strategy that makes Vernonia more attractive to visitors and new families. Perhaps most importantly, the vision community members have for Vernonia in 2020 is of a town better able to persevere in the face of adversity without losing sight of the community’s identity and long-term goals.

### Re . sil . ient/adj.

**a.** Tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change **b.** Having the political, economic and social resources to overcome obstacles while maintaining the values and long term goals of residents **c.** Ensuring the place that people love continues to be the place people love despite possible challenges

There are already signs pointing towards success:

\* **The schools**

The schools are the core of the community. Rebuilding the schools out of the floodplain is the first step for long-term recovery and resiliency and may help Vernonia develop an identity based on education. The effort to rebuild the schools is an energizing force in the community. New schools are a symbol for a Vernonia that is going to survive and be better than it was before. Please see Appendix E for more details on school siting criteria.

\* **The place**

Vernonia is uniquely positioned in close proximity to Portland amongst beautiful natural surroundings. It is a pocket in the woods far enough away from city life yet close enough so residents can easily visit Portland. There is an opportunity for Vernonia to play a role in the economy and culture of the Portland metropolitan region.

\* **The people**

Vernonia is full of talented, creative and dedicated people that want to see their community live up to its potential. They are endlessly resourceful and willing to think outside of the box for solutions. There is an opportunity to tap into the collective knowledge of the community and create a precedent for inclusive, collaborative decision-making.

\* **The process**

Residents were eager to participate and contribute their ideas to the visioning and school siting process. People coming together to **share ideas and resources leads to better outcomes.** This idea formed the foundation of the visioning process. As for the schools, community input in the siting is already being utilized. There is an opportunity for citizens and community leaders to capitalize on the momentum created by the school siting process to work together towards a common goal – fostering a safe, stable, and vibrant Vernonia.

Through the Vernonia 2020 Vision process, Bridges Planning Group concluded that **Vernonia truly is ‘Better Together.’** This theme flows throughout the document. ‘Better Together,’ the community can overcome precarious environmental, economic and political challenges to believe in the collective ability to make Vernonia the resilient city the residents, community leaders and City staff envision.

# Vernonia

## The Place The People

Vernonia is a town of about 2,300 people in Columbia County, set in the coast range between the City of Portland and the Pacific Coast in northwest Oregon. It is nestled between two hills at the convergence of two waterways: Rock Creek and the Nehalem River. Route 47, the Nehalem Highway, is called Bridge Street as it enters Vernonia from the south and serves as the main street through town. The Scappoose-Vernonia Highway runs southeast of Vernonia to Scappoose and Highway 30. Because Vernonia is off the beaten path, it is affectionately referred to as a “pocket in the woods.”

Residents describe Vernonia as a small town where many people know that their neighbors and children are safe walking or biking to school. The rural setting allows residents to access nearby fishing and hunting areas, newly opened Stub Stewart State Park, and the 22-mile Banks-Vernonia State Trail. The town is primarily residential, with only one remaining operating sawmill and shops clustered along several blocks of Bridge Street on the west side of town.

As a former timber town, Vernonia has struggled to attract and maintain employers and industry, and as a result, there are challenges to attracting and keeping young families. Currently, a high percentage of residents commute to nearby Hillsboro and the greater Portland metro region for employment at corporations like Intel and TekTronics. According to a 2006 Vernonia household survey conducted by the Population Research Center at Portland State University, 63 percent of families surveyed earn below 80 percent of the region’s median family income. In addition, almost 35 percent of the population is under the age of 19.



# Vernonia: A timeline

This page will be replaced by the 11x17 timeline

# Timeline

This page will be replaced by the 11x17 timeline

# Timeline

This page will be replaced by the 11x17 timeline

# Timeline

This page will be replaced by the 11x17 timeline

# Vernonia Then and Now

A historical narrative co-authored by Vernonia residents Tobie Finzel and Scott Laird with BPG

Vernonia, Oregon – 1874 to December 2nd, 2007

The first settlers arrived in the Nehalem Valley in 1874 to farm, trap and settle the pocket in the woods. Homesteads were built, and the town slowly grew. Before the railroad connected Vernonia to external markets, logging was not considered an economic activity outside of providing a way to build houses. This changed in 1922 when Vernonia's boom began. Situated 30 miles as the crow flies from Portland, nestled into an Eden of old growth forests and wild game, Oregon-American established rail service to and from the center of town. Shortly after, in 1925, Oregon-American Mill opened and became one of the largest electric mills in the world at that time. Before World War II, it was processing fir trees that were hundreds of years old. The virgin forests were brought in as bundles of logs and shipped out as processed timber by a fleet of steam trains. Vernonia flourished as a pocket in the woods with car dealerships and a bustling downtown. But the economy plummeted as the last of the old growth was felled and milled in 1957. In 1960 a steam-powered train still ran through the valley but only as a tourist attraction. It was under utilized, and by the end of 1965, there was no mill, no rail service and few jobs left in and around Vernonia. Like many other timber towns, the population declined.

The history of resource-based, small-town economies is one of boom followed by bust. However, Vernonia's story is different. Community leaders knew the timber industry would not last forever. In the early 1950s they embarked on a visioning process for the future of Vernonia called 'imagineering.' Vernonia marketed itself as a 'Friendship Town' and held the first Friendship Jamboree in 1957, a tradition that continues to draw residents and visitors to this day. The City and residents of Vernonia worked together and the results were a resilient, pro-active attempt to stave off the economic impacts of mill closure by utilizing tourism.



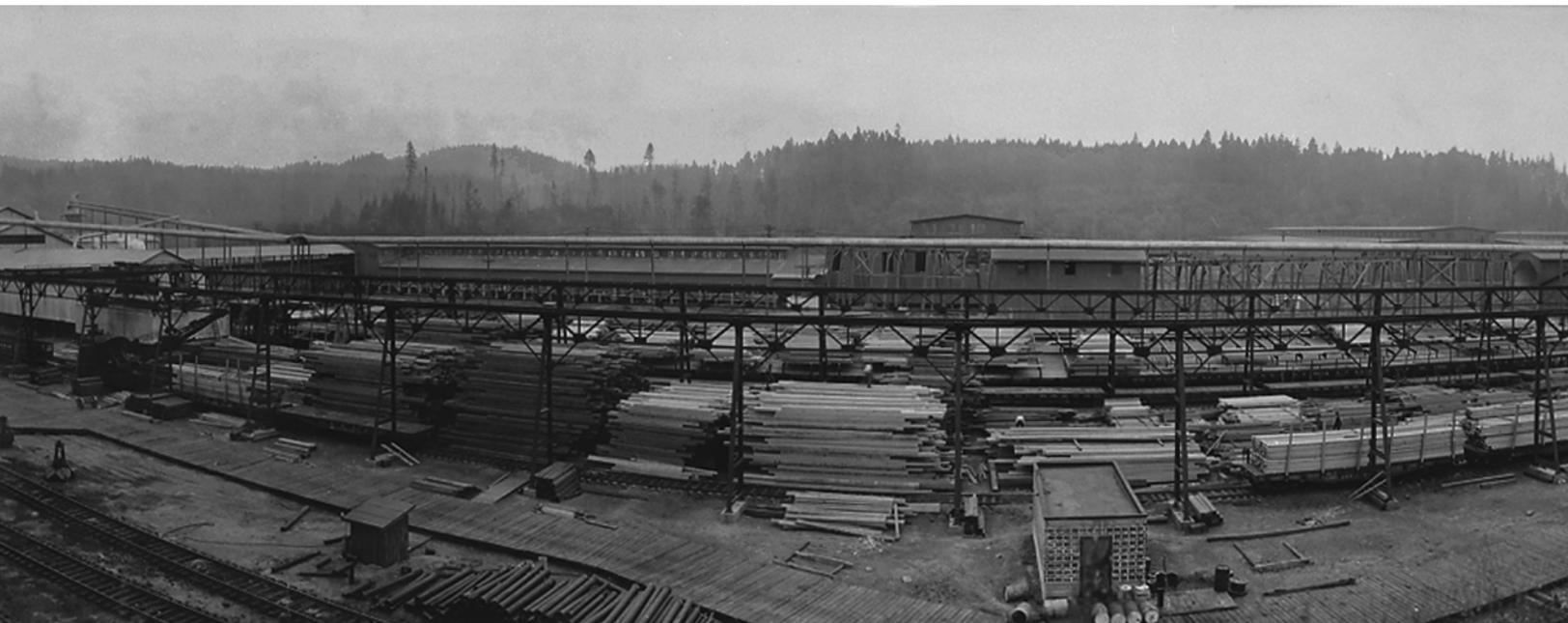
Vernonia has initiated other efforts to make the town a great place to live and visit. Before the 2007 flood, the city was hard at work on tourist-oriented development as well as celebrating its arts and heritage. Stub Stewart State Park opened recently, and Vernonia is a stop on the “rails to trails” bike path. To attract recreational bicyclists Vernonia billed itself as a bike-friendly town with camping areas and amenities. The First Friday celebrations include art galleries and a local farmer’s market that allows community members and tourists to enjoy and celebrate Vernonia’s heritage.

### Voices of Vernonia

In a recent interview, 72-year-old Shirlee Daughtry shared the experience of her lifetime in Vernonia and volunteer work in the public domain. She has held many positions and given her time and energy to countless community efforts including her current work as a city councilwoman, but she seems especially proud of being the designer of the annual Friendship Jamboree t-shirts. After describing the ups and downs of Vernonia, she cracked a smile, tilted her head and asked if we wanted to know what the slogan would be on the shirts this year. We nodded. She leaned in, her elbow on a sturdy table of old-growth fir and said, “Come hell or high water, I’ll always love Vernonia.”

However, Vernonia is in danger of becoming a modern-day ghost town as residents, unsure of the town’s future, are seeking new homes following the second 500-year flood in 11 years. As soon as Vernonia began to dry out, it was challenged again by the economic and emotional weight of razing, raising, rebuilding, and recovery. The problem is not, however, the lack of timber jobs and the two floods; it is the overall uncertainty that the history of flooding has deposited like silt into the town’s identity. Floods are a way of life in Vernonia.

Since the railroad linked Vernonia to the timber economy of Oregon, the town has survived ten noteworthy flood events. In 1937, Highway 47 (the main road in and out of town) was closed and 100 homes were damaged; in 1964 there was over three feet of water in the residential and business district; in 1977 homes were flooded and Highway 47 was closed again; and, in 1996, just months after a 500-year flood damaged the schools with over eight feet of water, there was a 100-year flood.



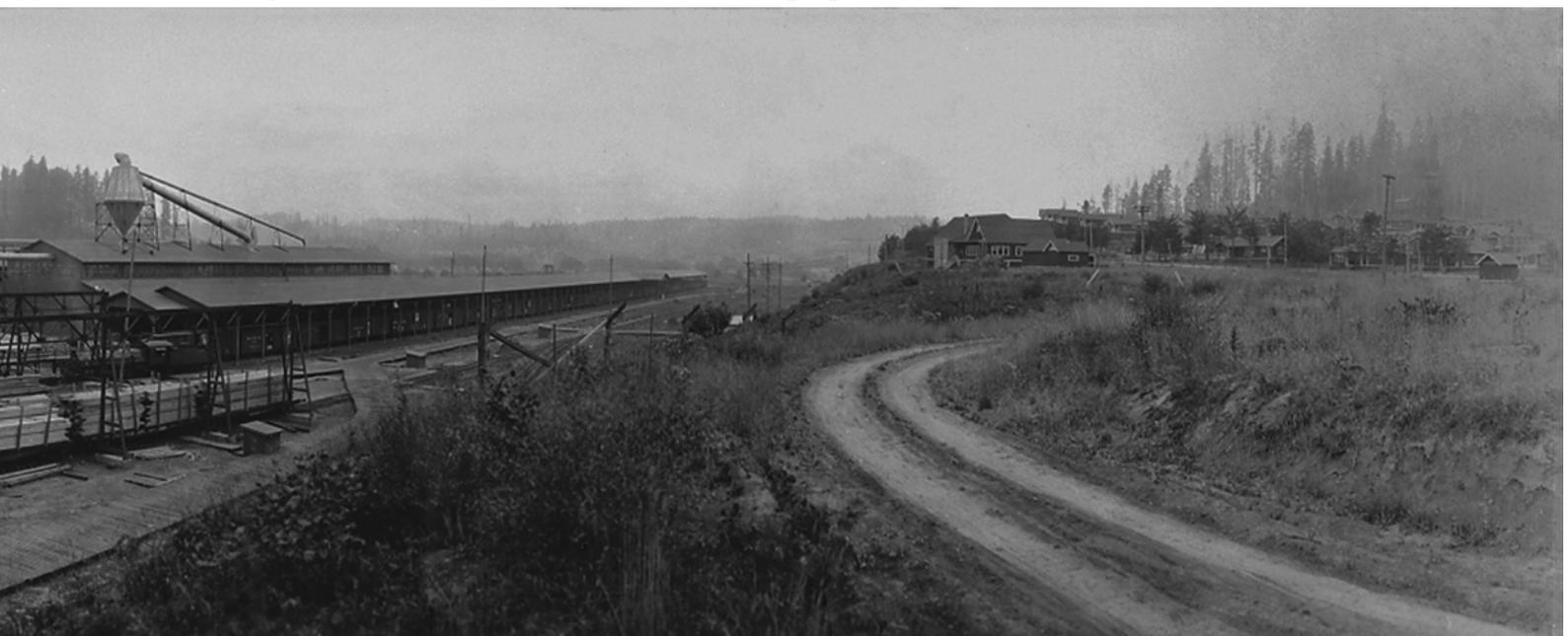
As always, Vernonia citizens fought hard to recover with help from the State and FEMA. Then the latest flood hit and washed away the school's computers, food stored in the food bank; it damaged medical offices and the senior center and eroded the sense of security for residents.

### **December 3rd, 2007 and beyond**

Rain continued to fall, relentlessly pounding the asphalt of downtown Vernonia and the tributaries of the Upper Nehalem Valley watershed. Taking the path of least resistance, the water flooded both Rock Creek and Nehalem River eventually peaking nearly 12 feet above the banks of both waterways. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, Vernonia community volunteers, fire and police department rescued people from their homes. The next day the National Guard helped people that had not yet been reached by local rescuers. Over 750 houses in Columbia County and 400 in Vernonia were affected, and Highway 47 became more river than road. As a result, the City and School District 47J now face over \$30 million in damages, gutted schools, modular classrooms, modular homes, waning school enrollment and a declining population.

However, Vernonia and its citizens put into practice the lessons learned in 1996. A hazard mitigation plan was in place during the flood and immediate recovery. No casualties were reported and recovery started immediately. In 2007, Vernonia "made as much progress in three days as they did over three weeks during the 1996 flood" according to Jim Tierney of Columbia County Flood Relief.

It is four months after the latest flood and the town is still in recovery. After this most recent flood, FEMA updated the 100 and 500 year floodplain, placing many more homes and residents into the floodplain, changing how and where they can rebuild or restore their homes and the resources available to do so. The severely limited amount of flood assistance forces traditionally cooperative local agencies and organizations to compete for what little is available. Some residents still do not have a home to come back to, and others are living in modular homes under a painfully ironic vinyl sign that reads 'Dwell awhile, FEMA style.' The people of Vernonia are resourceful and resilient by



nature, but the combination of lack of employment opportunities, severely damaged schools, some of the highest utility rates in the country and two 500-year floods in 11 years are heavy burdens. As former Vernonia mayor Tony Hyde warned in a recent *Oregonian* article, “If we don’t show significant progress by summer, this town is going to have a mass exodus.” It survived the closure of a mill and weathered floods, but is Vernonia slowly sliding towards being a relic, a memory, a ghost town?

Vernonia is fighting back as it always has. Through an extensive community participation and long-term visioning process called *Vernonia 2020 Vision*, community members have articulated goals for the future of their hometown. The public discourse served to reaffirm the community’s commitment to one another and set a course on making the town stronger and more stable for future generations. Among their goals, residents cited the need to provide their children with educational opportunities to compete and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Residents also prioritized the need for places where teenagers can learn job skills, make friends and have opportunities for activities outside of school. Another community priority was to create an economic development strategy to keep the rural character but provide jobs to help attract young families.

Community leaders are moving forward building a stronger, safer Vernonia by harnessing the collective wisdom and values of the community. Aware of the an alternative approach characterized by passive policy choices that could lead to missing funding opportunities, City Manager Aldie Howard and Learning Center Director Jessica Jones reached out to residents and asked them to articulate their priorities for a stable Vernonia. Dr. Ken Cox, the School District 47J superintendent is spearheading an effort to get state of the art schools built out of the floodplain. Marc Farmer of the Western Oregon Electric Co-op plans to build a new facility on higher ground and possibly share the site with Vernonia Cares Food Bank, the senior center and Providence Medical Center. There are discussions, in both cases, of the buildings being the first in an effort for Vernonia to relocate development out of the flood plain, build ‘green’ and develop sustainably. This is what Vernonia wants and what it needs. “I’m a make-do kind of person,” Cox said in a recent interview with the *Oregonian*. “But this town deserves more than make-do.”



# Planning Process

BPG and the City of Vernonia developed the following process to identify Vernonia's most pressing long-term challenges and the best ways to address them.

## { The process

- 1. Information Gathering and Sharing.** BPG identified and interviewed stakeholders, and worked with the City of Vernonia to form the Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC) to facilitate information sharing among those working on recovery and advise the vision project.
- 2. Public Involvement.** BPG and the City held a series of public meetings to identify community values and priorities. These meetings included developing criteria for building new schools out of the floodplain. In the first meetings, schools emerged as a central priority for many city residents and relate closely to the community's other priorities.
- 3. Research.** BPG, along with the City and ARC, selected and refined several top priorities. BPG conducted interviews and researched case studies to develop strategies for implementing the priorities.
- 4. Plan Drafting.** BPG drafted plan documents, with the assistance of several community members.
- 5. Implementation.** BPG is working with interested community members to implement the strategies.

## Who were the partners during the process?

The City of Vernonia and BPG assembled a stakeholder group called the Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC) comprising representatives of the City, other government agencies, non-profits, and the private sector to advise the visioning and prioritization process. The group was also envisioned as a forum for information sharing and collaboration related to the December floods and to potentially serve in the longer-term as a clearinghouse and community check-in group for Vernonia that did not exist before the flood.

At an initial meeting in late February, ARC members shared what they were actively working on, their needs, and the barriers they were facing. ARC meetings were held approximately monthly and provided valuable information and input into the process. A number of ARC members participated in the community meetings and a subset of ARC will most likely serve as an advisory committee within the Chamber of Commerce to ensure implementation of the Vision plan.

## Who did the City hear from?

BPG engaged the community through a series of public meetings and workshops held over a two-month period. A map in Appendix D shows the location of participating community members in relation to the revised floodplain.

## What did the City hear and how were priorities defined?

BPG compiled participants' comments into lists of statements within several broad categories. At the second and third public workshops, participants were provided with five dots each, which they used to choose the most important of these vision statements. The ideas represent community values that participants wanted to be maintained or actions that would help bring about their vision of Vernonia in 2020. Participants also brainstormed strategies that could be used to implement the highest ranked ideas.

The community's vision for Vernonia included new schools safe from flooding. Beginning with the second workshop, BPG included Vernonia's schools as a subset of the vision process. At this meeting, school district staff and a board member presented potential school designs and held a question-and-answer session with participants. At the second and third workshops, participants envisioned and developed criteria for future school sites and facilities, which the school district and Oregon Solutions will be using to select a site and design potential new schools.



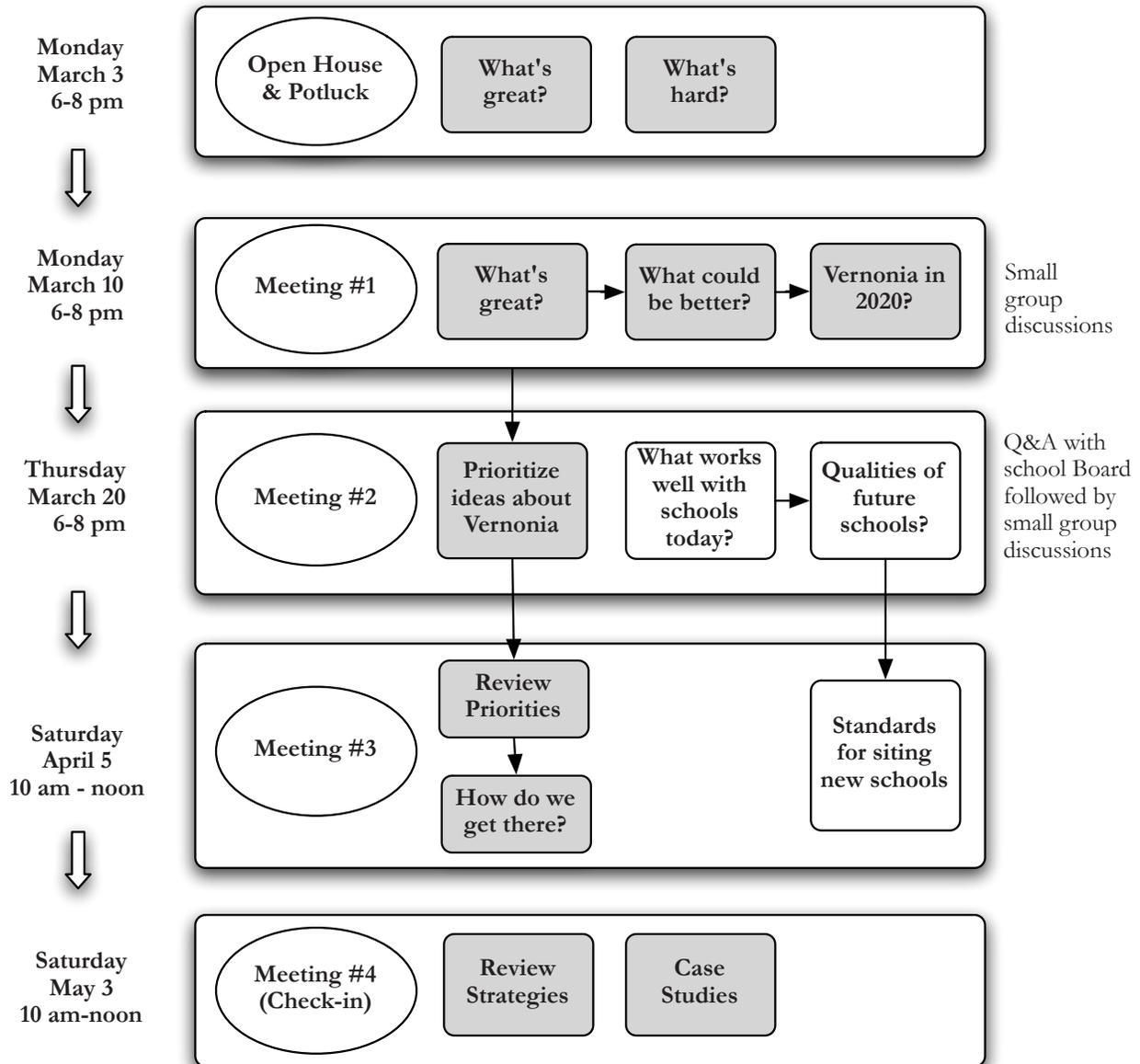
On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008 Bridges Planning supplemented ongoing community outreach by conducting two focus groups with Vernonia High School students, one comprised of juniors and seniors, the other of freshmen. Teens were a valuable but underrepresented presence at the community meetings; these focus groups provided an opportunity to understand how this vital population regards the future of Vernonia and addressed many of the same concepts as the community meetings.

General findings from the two focus groups included:

- \* Teens in Vernonia agree with the adult population regarding keeping Vernonia quaint and rural. Like their parents, they see a need for economic development including the creation of teen job opportunities and more local businesses.
- \* Teens feel disconnected from the decision-making process in Vernonia and many are concerned about the city's survival. Their pessimistic outlook on Vernonia's future led them to question Vernonia's ability to achieve the vision discussed at public meetings.
- \* Given the right opportunity and an engaging environment, teens expressed enthusiasm and interest in actively participating in future decision-making, including decisions about future development.

To achieve a high level of public involvement BPG and the City held an open house and four additional community town hall meetings.

## { Community Involvement







# Community Priorities



One of the city's primary goals in the aftermath of the 2007 flood was to identify community priorities to guide future investment of time and resources. The following eight priorities were identified during the community visioning process. The priorities are not listed in order of importance.

- \* Increase number of local jobs
- \* Preserve rural, small-town character
- \* Create places for teens
- \* Build outdoor facilities
- \* Refurbish/rebuild indoor facilities
- \* Attract young families
- \* Control/protect against flooding
- \* Strive to reduce utility rates

## { What are Tier 1 Priorities?

Bridges Planning Group consulted with ARC to determine how best to proceed with creating a plan to achieve the community priorities. Together, they decided that the eight priorities could be combined into two Tier 1 priorities aimed at attracting young families while preserving Vernonia's small-town character:

1. Develop an economic development strategy to increase the number of local jobs.
2. Create community facilities and places for teens.

## { What are Tier 2 Priorities?

ARC believed that there were ample resources being directed towards flood protection and reducing utility rates. These strategies were designated Tier 2 Priorities and are discussed in Appendix C. Ideas for integrating these priorities with Tier 1 strategies are presented later in the document.

# Long Term Priority

## { Economic Development



Living in Vernonia has always been about trade-offs. Despite the lack of local jobs, people stay for the small town feel, natural beauty and sense of community. In the aftermath of the 2007 flood the challenges of living in Vernonia are, for some, beginning to outweigh the benefits. A budgetary cushion to absorb economic and environmental shocks is important to resiliency. But with a limited tax base and significant infrastructure needs, the city found itself operating at a deficit long before the flooding. Thus, the city, like many of its citizens, has struggled to withstand the financial burden caused by the flood.

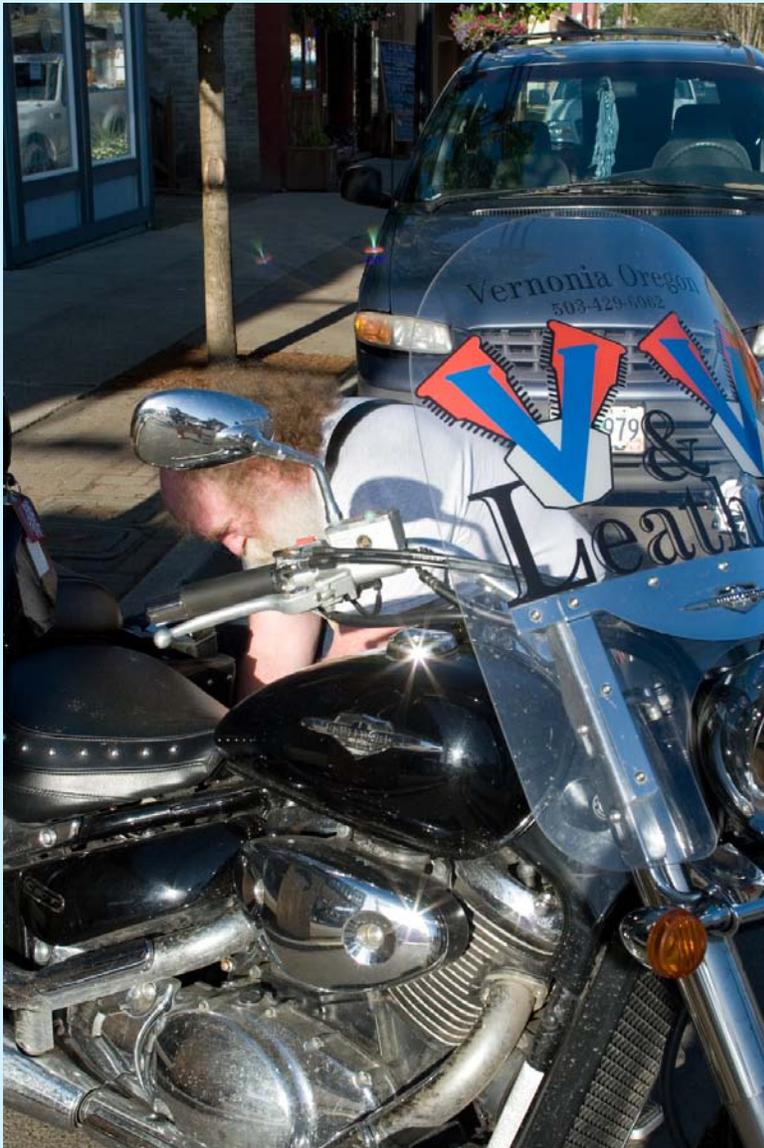
Through the visioning process, citizens and ARC members identified the need for a stronger local economy, both to improve their quality of life and the health of local government. Previous economic development successes include revitalizing the downtown core and improving recreational amenities. BPG found that many elements of successful rural economic development strategies are present in the community, but efforts are not always coordinated or consistent.

BPG researched new opportunities suggested by the community, including capitalizing on and attracting local artists or entering the ‘green’ economy. While these are potentially viable, they are unlikely to get off the ground without a strong foundation of support for small businesses within the community. At this time, there is no one agency in Vernonia responsible for implementing economic development strategies.

However, Vernonia enjoys access to a number of resources in the region that support rural economic development, including Columbia-Pacific Economic Development District and Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) at Portland and Clatsop Community Colleges. Locally, the Chamber of Commerce helps market Vernonia’s businesses and maintains a useful web site with links to federal, state and regional resources. Additionally, community members have recently formed the Vernonia Economic Development Committee. In its early stages the committee has been discussing strategies to ensure infrastructure such as internet, electricity, transportation, and industrial lands is in place to support business development.

In the past, a Business Assistance Team (BAT) made up of citizens served as a local resource for individuals developing business plans and completing loan applications. The organization also met with the City Administrator to discuss new economic strategies and opportunities. The BAT has ceased to meet regularly due to members being stretched thin with the flood recovery effort and the recent turnover of City Administrators.

BPG's most important recommendation is that these local and regional organizations which support economic development **work together to form a coordinated effort**. BPG believes that Vernonia will succeed by utilizing and strengthening its existing resources. Rural communities often look to outside sources, such as new employers, to revitalize their economies. Supporting existing businesses, however, is much more achievable and likely to succeed in the short term. Keeping local dollars in the local economy also creates a fertile environment for promoting new businesses.



## Recommendations

1. Reviving the Business Assistance Team (BAT) to provide local businesses with assistance, training and access to resources in the region
2. A "plugging the leaks" campaign to keep more money circulating within the local economy
3. Marketing Vernonia to residents within the city as well as the region

## The Business Assistance Team

Services provided by a revived BAT will foster small business development at the local level by aiding business plan development, loan applications, and by connecting people with available resources. BAT will also coordinate actions that promote small businesses and economic development. This function overlaps with that of the new Vernonia Economic Development Committee. These organizations should have common members to prevent duplication of efforts.

## Plugging the leaks

‘Plugging the leaks’ strategies aim to keep a higher share of money that currently leaves the local economy. A survey of residents will identify where and on what they spend their money. Data from the survey can enable businesses to develop strategies to capture more local dollars. The identification of goods or services that people would like to purchase locally but which are unavailable presents opportunities for new business or for existing businesses to expand.

## Marketing

The marketing campaign will attract visitors to Vernonia, stimulate the local economy and make potential new residents aware of the community. On a larger scale, it will create a unique image for Vernonia and solidify its role in the regional culture and economy.

## How does the strategy serve the community’s goals?

Citizens and community leaders want to increase the number of local employment opportunities. These recommendations lay a strong foundation for supporting Vernonia’s existing economy and provide a sustained focus on identifying new economic opportunities.

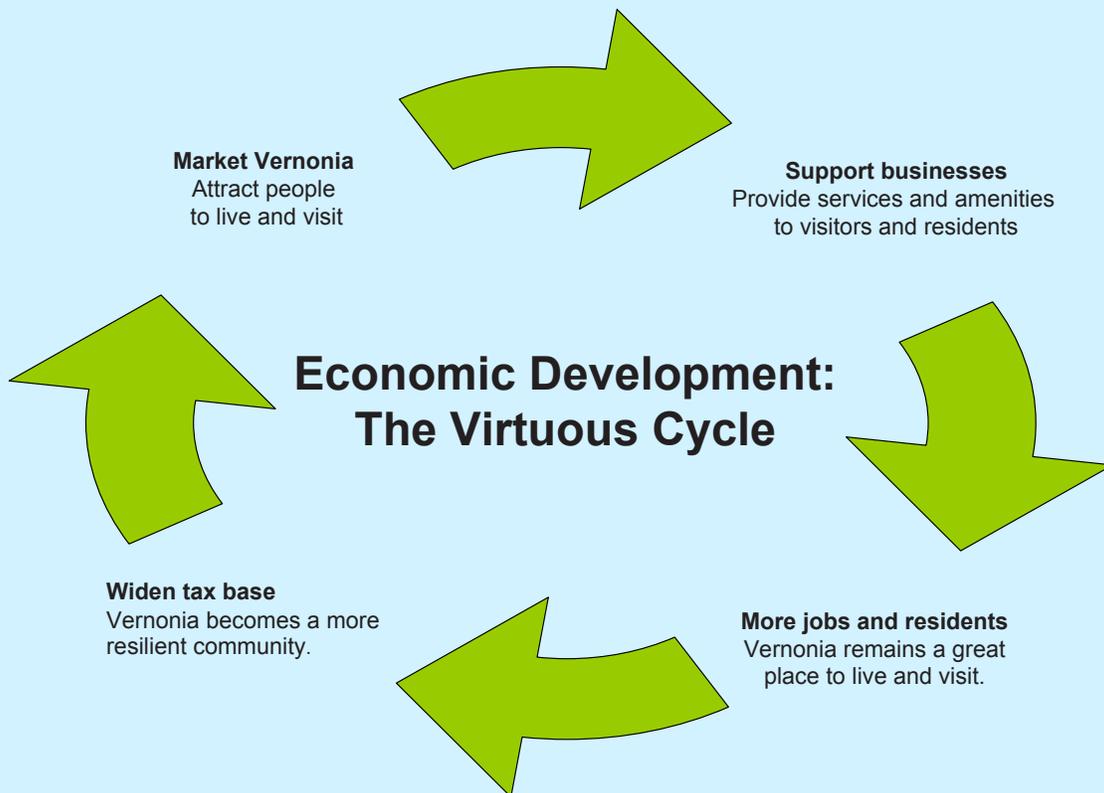
## How does the strategy serve the community needs?

Vernonia has a number of assets and resources directed towards the goal of growing the local economy. This strategy fulfills the critical need to pull all of these efforts together for more effective and efficient economic development.

The Vernonia Chamber of Commerce is a natural fit for spearheading coordination and implementation. It can administer the marketing campaign and the ‘plugging the leaks’ strategy (Conducting the ‘plugging the leaks’ survey represents a key opportunity to involve high school students in Vernonia’s recovery effort). The Chamber can also serve as the location to access BAT services. BPG recommends that a member of the Chamber of Commerce serve on the BAT. BPG also encourages the Chamber and BAT to work in tandem with the Vernonia Economic Development Committee.

# What are the likely effects of the strategy?

The recommended strategies are not sequential but rather work together to form a ‘virtuous cycle.’ A campaign to market Vernonia’s assets will attract people to town. This, together with an effort to ‘plug the leaks’, will support local businesses and jump-start economic development. New and existing businesses will better serve the needs of visitors and residents, enhancing Vernonia’s lure as a tourist destination and a place to live and start a small business.



# Economic Development Implementation Steps

## Strategy 1: Provide business development and management assistance

### **Action 1: Re-form a Business Assistance Team (BAT)**

Task 1.1: Identify 6-8 people with diverse skills and resources that will commit to work together to serve local businesses.

Task 1.2: Define the level of involvement of BAT, including a regular meeting schedule.

Task 1.3: Decide how businesses will learn about and access BAT services. This will ideally occur through the Chamber of Commerce.

### **Action 2: Provide individualized development services to existing and potential local businesses**

Task 2.1: Develop capacity to provide loan application assistance.

Task 2.2: Develop capacity to provide business plan assistance.

### **Action 3: Refer businesses to additional resources within the region**

Task 3.1: Develop relationships with Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) at Portland Community College and Clatsop Community College as well as Col-Pac EDD. Refer to attached CD for a list of resources within the region.

Task 3.2: Assist business owners to access business management services and trainings at the SBDC's campus.

Task 3.3: Organize trainings and classes in Vernonia.

### **Action 4: Research new business opportunities**

Task 4.1: Consider strategies for adding value to existing exports. An example is to turn milled lumber (current export) into furniture (new export).

Task 4.2: Consider strategies for expanding economic opportunities in Vernonia. An example is to add local art to the menu of tourist attractions.

Task 4.3: Conduct an annual review of regional resources available to support rural economic development. Examples include Sustainable Northwest's Healthy Forest Healthy Communities program or Mercy Corps Northwest's Loan Program.

### **Action 5: Periodically advertise BAT services and organized events**

Task 5.1: Place ads in local newspapers, produce a biannual newsletter to local businesses, etc.

## Strategy 2: Plug the Leaks

### **Action 1: Identify point-people and point-organizations to administer a ‘plugging the leaks’ survey**

Task 1.1: The Chamber of Commerce will make an effort to work with the Youth Advisory Council and the Vernonia School District to involve youth in administering the a ‘plugging the leaks’ survey.

### **Action 2: Administer survey to local residents and businesses**

Task 2.1: Refer to the ‘plugging the leaks survey’ on the attached CD.

### **Action 3: Identify opportunities to capture more dollars locally**

Task 3.1: Analyze survey results using online survey tool provided.

### **Action 4: Provide survey results to local businesses**

Task 4.1: Local business can then identify strategies to provide goods and services being consumed outside the community in a way that is convenient and cost-effective.

Task 4.2: Identify goods and services that people would like to consume locally that are not currently available.

### **Action 5: Develop a ‘buy local’ marketing strategy**

Task 5.1: Refer to Strategy 1 to develop a marketing strategy to encourage residents to support the local economy.

## Strategy 3: Market Vernonia

### **Action 1: Identify point-people and point-organizations to develop the marketing plan**

Task 1.1: The Business Advisory Team should meet with the Chamber of Commerce to identify who will develop the plan and take it forward.

### **Action 2: Complete a marketing plan for each target audience (Vernonians, potential visitors, potential residents)**

Task 2.1: Refer to the step-by-step guide to marketing in the attached CD.

### **Action 3: Market through appropriate public venues**

Task 3.1: Refer to attached CD for a list of local media contacts and resources valid as of June, 2008.

*Please see the Implementation section of the attached CD for a detailed table of implementation steps.*

# Short Term Priority

## { Community Facilities and Places for Teens



Public places for people to gather are vital for the sense of community that ties Vernonians together. This sentiment was expressed throughout the visioning process. In spite of being in the midst of recovery, when asked to think long term, Vernonia's residents identified community facilities as a top priority. In particular, community and ARC members mentioned the need to increase the number of places for one of Vernonia's greatest assets – young people.

### Recommendations for facilities:

1. Outdoor amphitheater
2. Teen Lounge

These recommendations evolved from specific priorities for 'community facilities' and 'places for teens.' Please see the Planning Process section and Appendix A for more information regarding the in depth process.



## { The Strategy

### { Strategy 1: Outdoor Amphitheater

An outdoor amphitheater uses the natural geography to create a space for community gatherings and performances. It represents an opportunity for the community to come together to make a re-investment in Vernonia in the aftermath of the 2007 flood. This project can serve as a short-term victory for the community that will sustain the long-term recovery effort.

## How does this strategy serve the community's stated goals?

The construction of an outdoor amphitheater will meet Vernonia's goals in the following ways:

- \* Provides residents with more places to hold local performances and gives teens a place to engage in the performing arts.
- \* Provides a community gathering space
- \* Increased tourism will contribute to the local economy.

## How does this strategy serve community needs?

Vernonia can benefit from a short-term victory that builds morale by demonstrating existing strengths and capacities. The amphitheater is ideal to serve as this short-term victory for the following reasons:

- \* It is cost effective. Research showed that an outdoor amphitheater can be constructed relatively inexpensively. (See attached CD)
- \* Planning and time requirements. Design and construction can be completed in a short period of time.
- \* Ability to tap into and build community capacity. It is an opportunity for residents to collaborate on a project that they themselves can design and construct.
- \* Potential catalyst. This short term victory can act as a springboard for future collaborations on longer-term and more difficult projects.

## What are the likely effects of this strategy?

An amphitheater adds to the value of living in Vernonia. It provides an additional community gathering space that is particularly well suited for artists. Possible effects:

- \* Cost of operation and maintenance.
- \* Requires an organization dedicated to programming
- \* Damage to nearby vegetation could result from large audiences if appropriate walking pathways are not provided

# { The Amphitheater

## **Action 1: Envision the Amphitheater**

Task 1.1: ARC and YAC will create a vision statement for amphitheater based on recommendations from this plan. The vision does not need to address design or other technical aspects, but should outline the role the amphitheater will fill in the community.

## **Action 2: Identify Opportunity to Collaborate with Existing Efforts**

Task 2.1: Consult ARC members to identify any existing efforts on this matter.

Task 2.2: Meet with pertinent parties to identify common agendas/goals. This would include a meeting(s) between ARC and key parties to discuss vision, desires, expectations (including community-use expectations), and needs. If a common vision and set of expectations emerges, an official partnership can be established. If collaboration is not a possibility, ARC should continue with process without it

Task 2.3: Identify champion(s). Identify one or two community members with sufficient time, commitment, and leadership ability to act as organizer, liaison, and driver for the project.

## **Action 3: Inclusive Planning and Design Process**

Task 3.1: Convene amphitheater workshop(s) with key players, ARC and YAC reps, and interested teens to establish criteria for the basic desired characteristics, location, and 'feel' for amphitheater

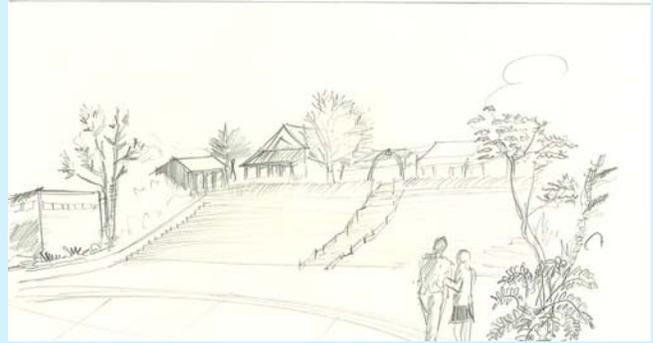
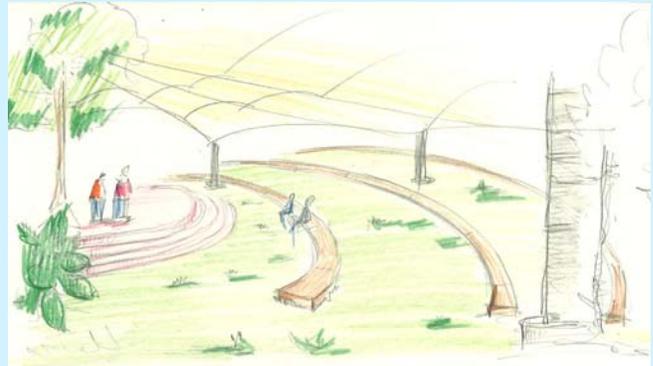
## **Action 4: Technical Information and Preferred Design**

Task 4.1: Seek pro-bono architectural and engineering assistance for technical consideration.

Task 4.2: Provide opportunity for stakeholders, YAC, and other community members to select the preferred design alternative for amphitheater facility.

Task 4.3: Key stakeholders gather cost estimates for total project, including the cost of labor and construction if not provided by community members

Task 4.4: Key stakeholders, ARC, and YAC create strategy for project funding and construction. This could include grants, fundraisers, cash and in-kind donations.



### Action 5: Community-Driven Construction

Task 5.1: YAC canvases the schools to gather support and volunteers for construction

Task 5.2: Get release forms for helping with construction

Task 5.3: On construction days, create an environment that is fun, collaborative, and uses the volunteer's talents.

### Action 6: Commemoration Celebration

Task 6.1: Celebrate! Hold community event to celebrate accomplishment and community effort.

*Please see the attached CD for a table of detailed implementation steps.*

## Community AMPHITHEATER

LOW-COST	MEDIUM-COST	HIGH-COST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Lake location</li><li>•Out-door option with no covering</li><li>•Donated architectural consulting</li><li>•Roughly \$20,000 in start-up costs for construction, electrical, and piping (minimal bathroom facility) inputs</li><li>•Outdoor location offers minimal maintenance and operation costs</li><li>•Opportunity for community driven design and construction</li><li>•Builds community capital</li><li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li><li>•Short-term completion (&lt; 7 months)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Lake location</li><li>•Out-door option with removable covering</li><li>•Donated architectural consulting</li><li>•Roughly \$50,000 in start-up costs for construction, electrical, and piping (2 bathrooms) inputs</li><li>•Outdoor location offers minimal maintenance and operational costs</li><li>•Opportunity for community driven design and construction</li><li>•Builds community capital</li><li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li><li>•Medium-term completion (&gt; 7 months)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Other location</li><li>•Construct new indoor facility, at least \$2 million+</li><li>•Much higher maintenance and staffing costs, depending on sophistication</li><li>•Loose opportunity for community involvement in design and construction</li><li>•Less community capital building</li><li>•Less community ownership</li><li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li><li>•Long-range completion (at least 2 yrs.)</li></ul>

\* The low- and medium-cost alternatives can be thought of as a single, phased approach. Vernonia has the option of creating the low-cost version now, and adding additional elements in the future. For example, later phases of the amphitheater can add additional rest rooms and concession stands.



## { Strategy 2: Teen Lounge

Creating “places for teens” was one of the main themes expressed during community meetings. BPG identified a teen lounge or clubhouse as an achievable option to meet this goal. Ideally, the lounge should be a place for younger teens and should include games such as pool, ping-pong, foosball and air hockey. Additional elements that teens suggested were comfortable seating as well as food and beverage vending machines.

### How does this strategy serve the community’s stated goals?

#### A teen lounge:

- \* Offers a safe supervised place teens can call their own
- \* Can house and offer opportunities for teen-oriented programs
- \* Helps attract young families
- \* Mitigates tension between police and teen population by having an identified place for teens meet and hang out.

### How does this strategy serve community needs?

The community expressed a desire to have “more things to do” for Vernonia’s youth. This appears to be a concern that youth do not have sufficient recreational options and that this leads to unproductive and even ‘risky’ behaviors. Young people comment that there is ‘nothing to do here.’ A teen lounge would provide a place for teens to congregate and participate in organized activities.

### What are the likely effects of this strategy?

A teen lounge will provide the community with a safe place for teens to meet, ‘hang out’, and possibly participate in enriching programs.

#### Possible effects:

- \* Costs of operations and maintenance
- \* Requires an organization dedicated to staffing and programming.

The teen lounge offers three different development options, Low-cost, Medium-cost, and High-Cost, that will offer the various levels of service. These are explained below.

## Teen LOUNGE

LOW-COST	MEDIUM-COST	HIGH-COST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use/reuse existing structure</li> <li>•No programs, simply a place to hang out and play games</li> <li>•Roughly \$30,000 in annual costs for some part-time staffing, general operating costs</li> <li>•Start-up costs can be minimized by purchasing recycled inputs</li> <li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use/reuse existing structure</li> <li>•Some low-cost community sponsored programs available (i.e. art/music contests)</li> <li>•Roughly \$90,000 in annual costs for dedicated staff, operating costs</li> <li>•Start-costs can be minimized by purchasing recycled inputs</li> <li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Purchasing an existing facility, \$300,000</li> <li>•Constructing a new facility, minimum of \$500,000</li> <li>•A variety of programs educational and recreational programs available and possible field trips</li> <li>•Roughly \$150, 000 in annual costs for dedicated staff and operating costs</li> <li>•Start-costs can be minimized by purchasing recycled inputs/new inputs can be purchased at higher cost</li> <li>•Applying for grants and donations can offset costs</li> </ul>
<p>* The low- and medium-cost alternatives can be thought of as a single, phased approach. Vernonia has the option of creating the low-cost version now, and adding additional elements in the future. For example, later phases of the Teen Lounge can add additional staff and youth programs.</p>		

# Implementation



Vernonia has taken on the Herculean task of addressing the needs of immediate recovery following the December floods. The work to rebuild, relocate, and finance the effort necessitated innovative partnerships to ensure success. Together, Vernonians have emerged from the tasks and tests with a renewed sense of purpose and faith in their community's ability to not only recover, but to grow from the experience.

Reflecting their commitment to the community, Vernonians dedicated substantial time, energy and creativity to the process of prioritization through the 2020 Vision. But the work does not end at prioritization and plan development. The implementation stage of the community visioning process requires still more output of this energy and time. This crucial stage will take the community's vision and transform ideas into bricks, mortar, jobs, and opportunity.

The following implementation strategy identifies the goals and general steps that must be completed and the organizations and individuals that must complete them for successful implementation of the 2020 Vision.

However, this simple strategy cannot capture the magnitude of the task ahead for Vernonia in the implementation of their priorities for long-term recovery. It is a snapshot of the possibilities that exist now for implementation and cannot predict the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead for Vernonia and its partners in recovery. The implementation of the vision is complex in that it must bring together various organizations, agencies, individuals and resources which may or may not have a history of cooperation. Together, these implementers must navigate through tremendous complexity.



**FAITH**



**HOPE**



**CHARITY**



**FIDELITY**





## { Next Steps

Creating the Infrastructure for  
Collaboration

Specific agenda items have been addressed in the descriptions of priorities. Even more specific information and forms are available on the attached CD. These forms are intended to make the work of implementation as simple as possible.

On a larger level, BPG recommends that these priorities and the tasks assigned to them be institutionalized within existing organizations. As Vernonia's organizations and agencies integrate themselves with one another and the region, they may leverage more power for more resources. This concept has been mentioned earlier in the document but is explicitly outlined here. The following recommendations are currently being vetted with the identified lead agencies.

### Step 1. The Chamber of Commerce

**Role:** Advocate for economic interests of Vernonia and its businesses

**Task A:** Convene the Agent of Recovery Collaborative (ARC), a group of local leaders and stakeholders for the purpose of sharing resources, information and furthering the Vernonia 2020 Vision.

**Point of Contact:** Donna Webb, Chamber of Commerce

#### ARC Member Organizations:

Blue Heron Apartments  
City of Vernonia  
Columbia County Commission  
Columbia County Flood Relief  
Columbia Community Mental Health  
Columbia-Pacific Economic  
Development District  
Community Action Team  
The Independent  
Isaak Walton League  
Lions Club  
Oregon Solutions  
Portland State University School of  
Urban Studies and Planning  
Providence Medical Center  
Upper Nehalem Watershed Council  
Vernonia Boosters

#### { Identified Partners

Vernonia Cares Food Bank  
Vernonia Community Preschool  
Vernonia Community Learning Center  
Vernonia Headstart  
Vernonia Fire District  
Vernonia Grange  
Vernonia Hands on Art  
Vernonia Pioneer Museum  
Vernonia Planning Commission  
Vernonia Senior Center  
Vernonia School District  
Vernonia Voice  
Wauna Federal Credit Union  
Western Oregon Electric Cooperative

## Step 2. The Agents of Recovery Collaborative

**Role:** Share information and resources

**Task A:** Reform Business Advisory Team (BAT) and reintegrate their work with existing efforts of the Economic Development Committee (See page 24)

**Point of Contact:** To be determined

**Identified Partners:** City of Vernonia

**Task B:** Create Youth Advisory Council (YAC) (See attached CD)

**Point of Contact:** To Be Determined

{ Identified Partners

Vernonia School District

## Step 3. Business Advisory Team

**Role:** Foster economic development of Vernonia and the surrounding area

**Task A:** Launch development of long term and short-term Vernonia 2020 Vision Priorities (See pages 26-27)

**Point of Contact:** To be Determined

{ Identified Partners

Chamber of Commerce  
Agents of Recovery Collaborative  
Economic Development Council  
City of Vernonia  
Youth Advisory Council  
Columbia Pacific Economic Development District

## Step 4. Youth Advisory Council

**Role:** Facilitate the integration of youth perspectives into city decision making and activities

**Task A:** Launch development of long term and short term Vernonia 2020 Vision Priorities (See pages 31-35)

**Point of Contact:** To Be Determined

{ Identified Partners

Vernonia School District  
Business Advisory Team  
Agents of Recovery Collaborative  
Chamber of Commerce



*Ruth Anna Brown*



# Appendices

# Appendix A

## Teen Focus Groups and Suggested Facilities for Youth

The Vernonia 2020 Visioning process identified creation of “indoor/outdoor facilities that include places for teens” as a community priority. In order to develop more specific strategies to address the priority, BPG sought comments and suggestions from Vernonia’s teen population, which was a valuable but underrepresented presence at the visioning public meetings.

On May 2nd, 2008 Bridges Planning conducted two focus groups with high school students. The first group was a mix of 20 juniors and seniors. The second group included 15 freshmen.

Both groups were asked what they thought Vernonia was lacking. Answers included:

- \* Good, cheap places to eat. Chain fast food restaurants were mentioned because affordable places to eat and ‘hang out’ are desirable. Though teens acknowledged they liked that Vernonia did not permit chains downtown.
- \* Jobs. Vernonia has limited options for teen employment. Those that have jobs mainly commute outside Vernonia, and spend much of their earnings on gas.
- \* Entertainment options. Items mentioned included a movie theater, bowling alley, arcade, a place to play games like pool, a skate and skills park, a music store/library, and venues for bands to play. Additionally, program opportunities for such things as art, music, “non-corny” anti-drug programs and Young Life were mentioned.
- \* Transit in and out of town. This was important to younger students who do not have licenses and the ability to get out on their own.
- \* There were mixed feelings about a swimming pool. Some liked natural swimming spots in the river, while others wanted a clean, year round pool.
- \* Educational opportunities. This included things like more gourmet cooking classes (not just the home ec. class), more language courses other than Spanish.

When asked about the Teen Lounge:

- \* Older students generally did not like it. Vernonia had “The Break Room,” a commercial teen lounge which closed because it was not profitable. It also lost its novelty quickly. However, older teens indicated they would utilize the facility more readily if programs were provided.
- \* Younger students loved the idea. They thought it should include games, drink and food dispensers, comfy couches, music, and fun activities/programs. Younger students, who cannot drive, feel there is a need for these types of places to “hang-out.”

Students were asked what they liked about Vernonia. Answers included:

- \* Rural, scenic setting that offers options for fishing, hunting and other outdoor recreational activities.
- \* Students like that Vernonia is safe and that the community cares.
- \* The small, tight-knit community was also mentioned, but some think it limits social circles and limits privacy.
- \* Students like sitting on the bridge and hanging out.

Students were asked to imagine an ideal Vernonia in 2020. Things mentioned included:

- \* Vernonia is still a small town, but the movie theater is refurbished and other abandoned and run-down buildings are fixed up.
- \* There are no fast food chains in town.
- \* There is some growth but not a lot. There are more shopping opportunities.

A few students expressed serious doubts that Vernonia will continue to survive and questioned the viability of efforts to make Vernonia more resilient. Though they care about Vernonia, they feel powerless to participate in the decision-making process and believe that their interests are not being expressed.

Students suggested that in order for them to become more involved in the community it is important that their participation shows results quickly. Given this sentiment, short-term projects like the amphitheater or survey production and distribution may be better suited for teens' participation than longer-term projects.

The community at large identified the following potential facilities during the visioning process, many of which were also suggested at the teen focus groups:

- \* Sports and recreational facilities such as tennis courts, a competitive size swimming pool, a covered sports stadium.
- \* A community/resource center.
- \* Entertainment facilities such as a multi-purpose theater and a bowling alley.
- \* Places for teens to hang out.
- \* Common gathering places for the community.

BPG developed the following criteria to identify and evaluate potential projects:

- \* Financially feasible
- \* Utilizes and builds community capacity
- \* Short implementation time frame
- \* Not already in progress
- \* Independent of new schools efforts

BPG presented four possible facilities at a community check-in:

- \* The recommended amphitheater and teen lounge facilities, which received positive feedback
- \* A swimming pool, which was removed from consideration due to high cost and the possibility of providing a pool in the new school facilities

# Appendix B

## Process Narrative

**Written by Jessica Jones, Vernonia native and grant writer for the City of Vernonia**

*Note: The following is the City of Vernonia's perspective on the need for, and unfolding of the community involvement process. It is included in this document to highlight the importance of gathering citizen perspectives in Vernonia's planning efforts.*

The flood on December 3, 2007 in Vernonia, Oregon was a devastating natural disaster. After the initial emergency response subsided, informational meetings led by FEMA, state and county leaders directed citizens toward short-term assistance and local volunteer groups collecting data. During the early effort - 3-6 weeks after the disaster - local leaders from Columbia County and the City of Vernonia spoke to citizens and volunteers openly about the reality of the need for wise, long-term recovery. "Now is the time to think outside of the box," Columbia County Commissioner and former Vernonia Mayor Tony Hyde explained in December about the rebuilding of Vernonia and surrounding communities. "Dream big. There is tremendous opportunity." With the understanding that all grants for long-term recovery required documented participatory processes, the City of Vernonia wanted to start the community involvement effort immediately.

A process involving the citizens, one in which voices could be heard and discussed, was needed in the community. When Bridges Planning Group contacted Vernonia after the flood, there was a lack of information sharing and thoughtful community meetings. Citizens asked City staff about when a meeting would occur that would let them ask questions, rather than just be given information. The community wanted to have a role in the new era for Vernonia. It was imperative that projects citizens supported would be implemented for a united recovery and rebuilding of Vernonia. This was the basis for the methodology employed by Bridges Planning Group and fostered by the city of Vernonia.

Bridges Planning Group spent time in Vernonia understanding the current community climate and researched the history of public participation and plan implementation in Vernonia. They designed a somewhat aggressive timeline that gathered citizens together to share information about the present, thinking about the past, and looking to the future as a way of thoughtful prioritization of community projects. This process was Vernonia 2020 Vision and consisted of four in depth community information gathering meetings. Past visioning plans, the Vernonia comprehensive plan and other studies were available for citizens to review at these meetings. At each meeting, comments and priorities from the previous meeting were posted. Priorities changed as more citizens joined the process and a sound method emerged for prioritization.

Simultaneously, a group of local leaders, key players and stakeholders was created to review the information gathered at the Vernonia 2020 Vision meetings. This group, known as the Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC) allowed local decision makers to share their needs and plans for moving forward. This group included leaders from the senior center, schools, food bank, electric cooperative (all of which were flooded), area non-profits and local businesses as well as flood relief workers working to organize the rebuilding of homes. ARC discussed the priorities and how to continue moving the process forward. They talked about the realities and challenges of implementing these priorities and acted as a check-in group where other local issues, decisions and concerns were discussed. The ARC is set up to eventually work as a long-term clearinghouse and community check-in group for Vernonia, something that did not exist before the flood. This group will provide committed leaders for helping the community to implement priorities discovered by the Vernonia 2020 Vision process.

# Appendix C

## Tier 2 Priorities

Protection from flooding and high utility rates were ranked as high priorities by residents and are essential to making Vernonia more resilient. However, they are already being handled by existing agencies and there is significant momentum within the community towards implementation. For these reasons, they were identified as “Tier 2” priorities and BPG did not develop detailed strategies for them.

Flooding and high utility rates present significant threats to Vernonia and are potential barriers to the success of other strategies. However, they are not new to Vernonia. They are addressed in two recommendations made in Vernonia’s 1997 Strategic Planning Process, following the 1996 floods. This process recommended that the community guide development so as to:

- \* Not ‘wreak havoc’ on the natural environment
- \* Plan capital facilities for future needs, including an adequate budget for maintenance

Vernonia did not consistently adhere to these recommendations in the years between the 1996 and 2007 floods, contributing to the flood damage and the highest utility rates in the region. In the wake of the recent flood, there appears to be a recognition that concerted action and creative thinking is needed to address these issues. Conversations with stakeholders further highlight a recurring theme of this document: collaboration will be critical if Vernonia is to make strides significant strides towards resiliency.

The next parts of this section identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) related to Tier 2 priorities.

### { Protect Against Flooding }

This priority is drawn from two statements related to flooding that received nearly equal community support – the highest combined level of support of any priority.

- \* Control/protect against flooding
- \* Utilize undeveloped riparian areas to keep water out of town

In further discussion, meeting participants felt that a series of small but steady changes with positive, cumulative impact and close coordination of projects among the multiple responsible entities would be necessary to address these priorities.

#### Opportunities/Strengths

Relocating or flood-proofing public facilities currently located in the floodplain will create an opportunity for reuse of the land in ways that are compatible with the natural functions of the floodplain. Specific opportunities include the potential relocation of Vernonia schools, electrical substation, and sewage treatment ponds. The use of upstream riparian areas for water storage, known as natural valley water storage, would also help mitigate future flooding.

Adhering to comprehensive long-range planning, which received some support in community meetings, can also establish the regulatory steps needed to make Vernonia more resilient to flooding. The long-range plan can include steps to relocate development from the floodplain. The City of Vernonia would need to exercise leadership to

Finally, incorporating stormwater management techniques into new development can mitigate localized flooding issues as well as help reduce runoff into rivers and streams.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a need for better data and models to help identify the risks and benefits of each of the possible steps that Vernonia can take to reduce the risk of flooding.

## Threats/Weaknesses

Vernonia's 1997 Strategic Planning Process noted that cutting trees too fast and extensive clear-cutting will cause flooding of the Nehalem River and Rock Creek for twenty years, until replanted trees grow.

It has also been suggested that bridges and culverts caused constriction of flood waters. It is possible that removing, relocating or redeveloping some structures may alleviate a portion of the flooding problem.

While a number of agencies are actively involved in the flood recovery process, helping individuals repair, elevate, and/or relocate their homes, the necessary combination of resources and expertise may not be focused on the bigger picture of Vernonia's vulnerability to flooding.

# { Strive to Reduce Utility Rates (Electricity, Garbage, Sewer, and Water) }

Higher utility rates in Vernonia relative to surrounding areas constitute a financial burden on citizens as well as a barrier to economic development. Meeting participants ranked utility rates as the 7th highest priority and identified electricity, water, sewer, and garbage as services with high rates. A spot check of nearby cities confirmed that rates do appear to be higher in Vernonia, with the exception of garbage service.

A number of factors in the natural and built environment contribute to high utility rates in Vernonia. Electric service provided by Western Oregon Electric Cooperative has a high cost partly due to the large, rural and heavily forested service area. Ratepayers are predominantly residential customers – in the case of electricity, 92 percent as compared to a typical mix of 10 to 20 percent industrial, 30-40 percent commercial, and 40-60 percent residential customers.

One factor in recent rate increases is renewed attention to deferred maintenance. Western Electric embarked on a 10-year maintenance program in 2005 and current high rates are needed to compensate for past rates that did not cover preventative maintenance. Water and sewer rates are likely to increase further in the next fiscal year, in part due to the need for infrastructure upgrades.

## Opportunities/Strengths

Attracting new businesses to Vernonia through economic development strategies will create a more typical balance of industrial, commercial, and residential customers, lessening the current burden on residential customers. Light industrial customers that use a steady supply of electricity are of particular importance. There are existing potential sites for industrial development identified in Vernonia's comprehensive plan and in the case of electricity, are well-served by infrastructure (the cost of extending service is borne by the customer).

Relatively dense, central new development, which could occur around a new school, would decrease the average cost of service.

Conservation and energy efficiency are residents' best short term strategies for minimizing the personal impact of high utility rates.

## Threats/Weaknesses

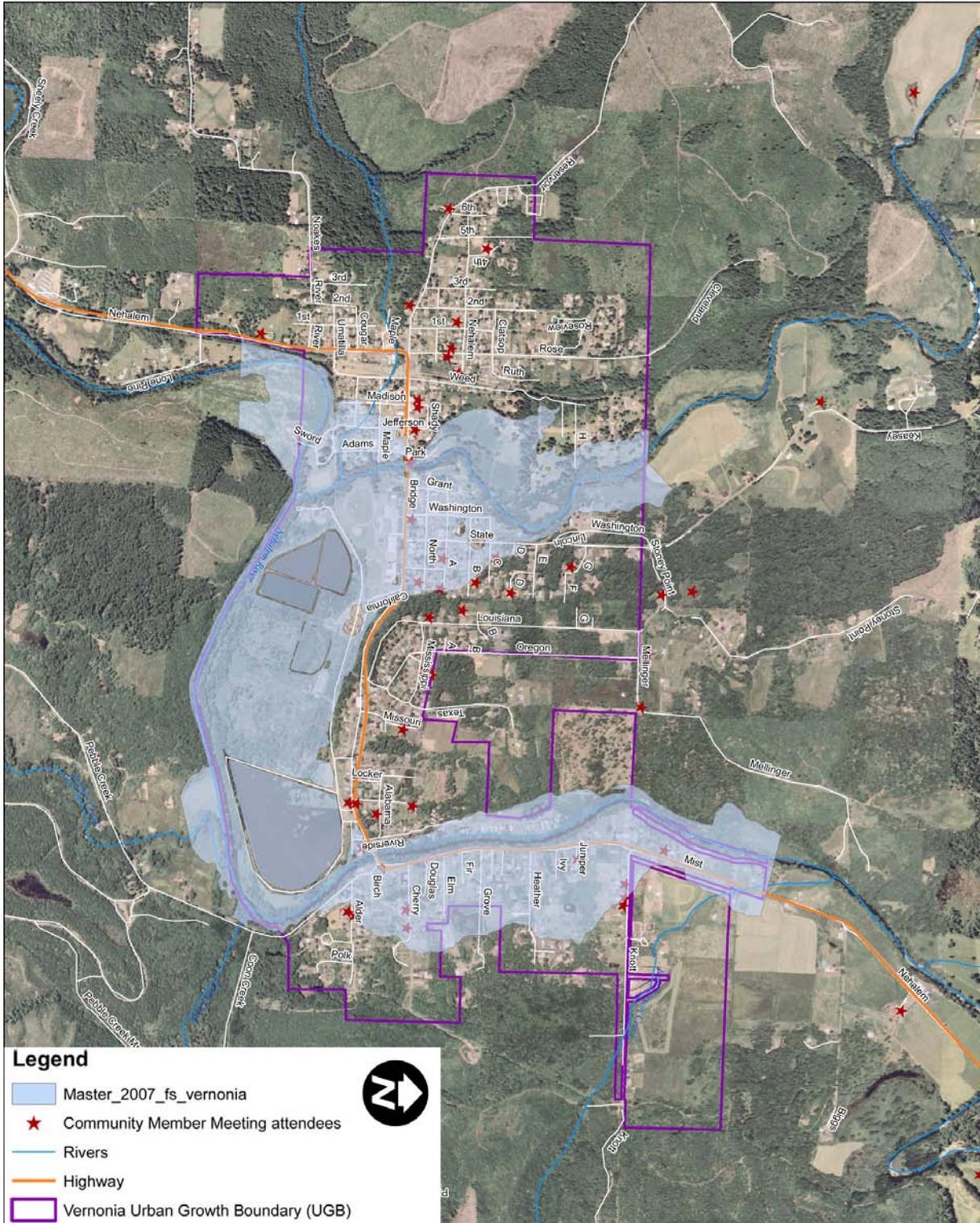
Current facilities, including the electrical substation and sewage treatment lagoons, are located in the floodplain. The responsible agencies are taking steps to relocate these facilities, however a sustained, long-term commitment by the community will be needed.

While it appears that steps are being taken to improve the resiliency of Vernonia's utility infrastructure resilient, these programs will not lessen the short term burden on residents.

# Appendix D

## Community Involvement Map

The map shows the location of meeting participants in relation to the revised FEMA floodplain designation.



# Appendix E

## New School Criteria Development

In addition to the longer-term priorities, BPG asked the community to create school siting criteria to be used in the decision on where to build the new schools. This process was coordinated with the school district and school board and was incorporated into two meetings during the Vernonia 2020 Vision public involvement period. Oregon Solutions received the following information and has used the criteria to narrow down a range of alternative sites.

The table below shows how each of the five small groups rated each criteria and the overall average ranking.

### New Schools Criteria: AVERAGED, RANKED AND DISCUSSED AT APRIL 5<sup>TH</sup> MEETING

LOCATION OF SCHOOL SITE	Small Group #					Average
	1	2	3	4	5	
Safe walk and bike routes to school	4	4	4	5	5	4.4
Close to town/central location	3	3	4	4	3	3.4
Compatible with future residential development	5	2	3	3	4	3.4
Access to local services (businesses, emergency, etc.)	1	3	2	4	3	2.6
Close to present residential areas	1	2	5	3	1	2.4
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL SITE</b>						
Shared school campuses	5	5	4	4	5	4.6
Multi-purpose school facilities	4	5	4	4	5	4.4
Student drop-off/pick up access	4	4	3	5	5	4.2
Space for indoor activities (pool, theatre, sports)	3	4	4	5	5	4.2
Space for outdoor activities (sports fields, community garden)	5	3	4	3	5	4.0
Green building design	5	4	5	3	3	4.0
Plenty of parking	2	4	3	3	3	3.0

# Appendix F

## Community Priority Development

At the second and third community meetings, BPG posted lists detailing the various priorities generated through previous meetings and surveys. At the door, attendees were given five colored stickers (dots) and asked to “vote” by placing these stickers next to their most important priorities from the lists posted on the wall. The voting results guided development of the community’s vision and are shown in the table below.



### Community Priorities: RESULTS FROM MULTIPLE MEETINGS

PRIORITIES FOR ACHIEVING THE 2020 VISION	MARCH 20TH	APRIL 5TH	TOTAL
Control/Protect Against Flooding	13	11	36
Utilize undeveloped riparian areas to keep water out of town	12		
Maintain/Preserve Small-town Feel/Rural Character	18	12	30
Create places for teens	18	10	28
Build outdoor facilities	17	8	25
Refurbish and/or build indoor facilities	15	9	24
Get more jobs in/near town	16	4	20
Strive to reduce utility rates (Sewer, Water, Electricity)	14	6	20
Attract young families	13	5	18
Create facilities for community health	8	5	13
Promote environmentally friendly, ‘green’ development	8	2	10
Ensure large number of students go to college or have jobs in town	7	3	10
Build upon/expand downtown	6	2	8
Improve quality of roads	6	1	7
Create better transportation ‘options’	4	3	7
Build more housing out of the flood zone	1	6	7
Re-create places for seniors	3	3	6
Expand city limits to accommodate growth outside floodplain	2	4	6
Gradually move existing development out of the floodplain	1	5	6
Utilize long range planning	5		5
Employ a more transparent decision making process	4	1	5
Prevent new development in floodplain	2	3	5
Keep town walkable	2	1	3
Attract local higher education opportunities	1	1	2
Support community with tourism	1	1	2
Actively create more opportunities for citizens to be involved	1	1	2
Ensure more affordable/economically diverse housing	1		1
Grow, but not too many new homes	1		1
Create more rental housing	0	1	1
<b>NUMBER OF DOTS</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>40</b>

# References

- Ahlers, D. and Hummel, R. [Prepared by] (2007). *Lessons from Katrina. How A Community Can Spearhead Successful Disaster Recovery (Broadmoor Planning and Implementation Guide)*. Electronic version available from [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/17815/lessons\\_from\\_katrina.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/17815/lessons_from_katrina.html)
- Burby, R.J with Beatley, T., Berke P.R., Deyle, R.E., French, S.P., Godschalk, D.R., Kaiser, E.J., Kartez, J.D., May, P.J. Olshansky, R., Paterson, R.G., and Platt, R.H. (1999). "Unleashing the Power of Planning to Create Disaster-Resistant Communities." *Journal of the American Planning Association* [Electronic Version], 65:3, September 1999, 247-258. Retrieved from <http://www.informaworld.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/smpp/content?content=10.1080/01944369908976055>
- Huso, D. (2007). *Teen Centers, Complete with Teens*. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from <http://www.perspectivesonyouth.org/Pages-Articles/Summer-Fall-2006/Teen%20Centers%20-Huso.html>
- Lyons, T. (2002) "Building Social Capital for Rural Enterprise Development: Three Case Studies in the United States." *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship* 7, no.2 (August 2002): 193-216.
- Kinsley, M (1997) *Economic Renewal Guide*. Snowmass, CO: Rocky Mountain Institute.
- Lyons, T. & Hamlin, R. (2001). *Creating an Economic Development Action Plan*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Jacksonville State University, Center for Economic Development. (2006). *NAES Economic Impact Statement*. Retrieved on April 3, 2008 from <http://www.neaes.org/pages/?pageID=4>
- NCDEM. (2002). Kinston-Lenoir County Acquisition Project: Sustainable Redevelopment. Retrieved April 26, 2008, from [http://www.dem.dcc.state.nc.us/Mitigation/case\\_kinston.htm](http://www.dem.dcc.state.nc.us/Mitigation/case_kinston.htm)
- NCYF. (2007). Guide to Starting a Youth Program. Retrieved April 3, 2008 from <http://www.ncfy.com/publications/guidetostarting/index.htm>
- Riley, A. L. (1998). *Restoring Streams in Cities: A Guide for Planners, Policy Makers, and Citizens*. Island Press.
- Real Estate Weekly. (2006). *Site work underway for school's unique outdoor amphitheater*. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from <http://www.allbusiness.com/operations/facilities-commercial-real-estate/4002662-1.html>
- Schroeder, T., & James, J. (n.d.). *Collaboration in Greenway Development: Case Study of the Grand Forks Greenway* [Electronic Version] from <http://www.prr.msu.edu/trends2000/pdf/schroeder.pdf>
- Terry, L. (2005). *Architecture Students Setting Stage at Camp Aldersgate*. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from <http://dailyheadlines.uark.edu/4958.htm>
- Zanussi, M. (2003) Sandnes Byke City. United Nations Workshop on Sustainable and Healthy Urban Transport and Planning. November, 2003, 16-18. Retrieved on April 3, 2008 from <http://www.thepep.org/en/workplan/urban/documents/Zanussi.pdf>

# Credits

## Photos and Illustrations

Melanie McCloskey, Photos, pages viii, 3, 14, 19, 20, 23, 29, 33, 37, 38, 40. All rights reserved.  
Email [melaniemccloskey@hotmail.com](mailto:melaniemccloskey@hotmail.com) for more information

Oregon-American Mill Photo courtesy of Vernonia Pioneer Museum, Tobie Finzel, pages 11-13.

Harleen Kaur, Bridges Planning Group, Illustrations. All rights reserved  
Email [hrkaur1@gmail.com](mailto:hrkaur1@gmail.com) for more information

Other photos by Bridges Planning Group.

## Project Sponsors

The following generously supported the Vernonia 2020 Vision project:

Café 47  
CH2M Hill  
Elaine and Arnold Cogan  
Harper Hauf Peterson Righellis, Inc  
The Independent  
KPF Consulting Engineers  
Vernonia's Voice  
Vernonia Community Church  
Walker Macy



## Project Supporters

Bridges Planning Group would like to thank the following for their time, energy, support, and assistance:

Vernonia residents and others who participated in community meetings  
Agents of Recovery Collaborative (ARC)  
City of Vernonia Staff  
Vernonia Public Library Staff

## For More Information

Contact Bridges Planning Group at [bridgesplanning@gmail.com](mailto:bridgesplanning@gmail.com)