

In December of 2007, the community of Vernonia and other towns in the Nehalem Valley were hit with the second 100-year flood event in 10 years. The Vernonia Senior Center and the Food Bank were deluged with four feet of water. These two facilities not only serve Vernonia residents but citizens from Birkenfeld, Mist, Timber, and the surrounding area. Within 72 hours of the water receding, volunteers working around the clock were able to clean out the Food Bank and it was back in business. In the next few months during the monumental cleanup, the Food Bank served over 900 people each month. The Food Bank is still operating in the floodplain and is at risk every winter of flooding. Volunteers must be on standby during high water events to mobilize before the water is too deep and remove everything in the building before it is ruined. The Senior Center proved to be too damaged to rebuild and was demolished. They have been without a home since then, bouncing from space to space.

The two non-profits were determined to move to high ground, where they would not be victims of the next flood and would be in position to help the community recover from future disasters. Serving similar populations and having similar missions, the Senior Center and Food Bank decided that rather than build two separate facilities, to combine their services under one new building. With the help of a land swap between Oregon State Parks and the City of Vernonia, a vacant lot adjacent to the new Vernonia Medical Clinic, out of the flood plain, was made available for a new combined Senior Center/Food Bank. The two non-profits set out on their "High Ground Campaign" where incredibly, the small rural community with less than 2,500 residents, raised over \$180,000 to assist them in building a new Senior Center/Food Bank.

The City of Vernonia, as owner of the land on which the new Senior Center/Food Bank is being built, (successfully) applied for a \$2 million Community Development Block Grant. The City, with extensive experience in public contracting and contract management, is the project manager for this project. Columbia Pacific Economic Development District, the region's federally designated district for NW Oregon, is the grant manager. S/EA, a local architect, designed the facility and established the building specifications. Community Action Team (CAT) will be donating their construction supervisor's time to manage the construction contract.

The Senior Center/Food Bank patiently waited their turn as the valley rebuilt, and finally in January of 2016 the City of Vernonia was awarded a block grant on behalf of the two non-profits, along with a grant from Meyer Memorial. These grants and the funds they had raised totaled enough to proceed on the new facility based on the 2015 construction estimate. The group's instruction to the architect was to design a building that was practical, easy to maintain and cost effective.

In June 2018, the project was put out to bid. The low bid that came back was \$1 million over the engineers estimate and preliminary estimates from contractors. By 2018, construction costs had reached an all-time high. The non-profits and the architect went back to work and cut square feet and amenities from an already humble building to reduce the cost. In the spring of 2019, the project went back out to bid after representatives for the groups made sure every contractor within 75 miles knew the project was going back out to bid and how important it was for the community. This time the lowest bid came in \$575,000 over. In working with the low bid contractor and the architect and making more cuts to the size and finishes in the building, we were now within \$250,000 of a balanced budget. We applied for and received a 250,000 grant from C. Keith Birkenfeld Memorial Trust through the Seattle Foundation.

Vernonia and the surrounding communities have disproportionately high percentages of vulnerable populations: The US Census statistics indicate that 21% of the City of Vernonia's population lives below US poverty level. Median household income of \$40,861 is 17% lower than the State and National median. Residents over the age of 60 represent 35% of the community's population. With limited capacity, currently the Senior Center serves 50 and Food Bank serves 371 residents each month. A shared facility will reduce overall costs to each non-profit and provide a more inviting environment for visitation and meals. Expectation is that participation by seniors and the number of meals provided will

increase by 50% once the new facility is in operation. The foodbank anticipates the savings from being in the new facility will prepare them to serve more citizens in need with emergency food assistance.

This project is a true cooperative effort of the entire community. As noted earlier, the Senior Center and Food Bank raised over \$180,000 toward the project, have been engaged with the design of the facility, and have organized local project volunteer efforts for small improvements, signage, and landscaping of the facility.

We are proud of the long-standing effort and true determination that make the Grand Opening on September 12th, 2020 a true celebration.

Vernonia Cares Moves In to New Building!

The Vernonia Cares food pantry began operations in their new facility at 547 Weed Avenue on Tuesday, August 11.

It was a thrilling and historic moment when the first order of food rolled out the door, especially for Cares Executive Director Sandy Welch, who has been waiting 19 years for this day to arrive.

"Exciting! Exciting!" said Welch on the first day in the new building. "It's clean, it's new, and it's ours!"

Vernonia Cares formerly operated from the American Legion Hall, so having a building of their own is a new concept for Welch and her staff, and has been a long time coming. "My first official meeting as the Director of Vernonia Cares food pantry was about a new facility, and that was 19 years ago," said Welch. "So, that's how long I've been working on this, and it was in motion before I started."

The new facility is owned by the City of Vernonia, and will be leased to its two tenants, Vernonia Cares and the Vernonia Senior Center. The facility was built using \$2 million in Federal Community Development Block Grant funds.

Vernonia Cares now has their own load dock, which makes the chore of unloading



Cares Executive Director Sandy Welch pulling orders for clients in their new warehouse.

their freight deliveries much easier; at their old location freight was delivered to the sidewalk in front of the building and then moved by hand truck up a ramp and







