

FEMA



Best practices

Disaster Mitigation Working in Oregon

Vernonia



Vernonia's Whole Community Working for a Resilient Future

Vernonia, Oregon — This remote community of about 2,150 people is celebrating the relocation and replacement of its three school facilities. The success of the enormous project came after years of struggling to recover from the 2007 “flood of record,” the worst of 27 flood events that are part of the town’s history.

Among the many challenges that followed the flood was the need to replace the heart of their community, the elementary, middle and high schools that served more than 700 students. After an impressive investment of resources, and intense effort by the local communities, Vernonia now has a far brighter outlook. Its beautiful new school buildings are finally relocated out of the floodplain and in full use.

A history of disaster damage:

The city of Vernonia has been plagued with severe, repetitive, highly damaging floods, typically from rain falling on snow in the Nehalem River and Rock Creek watersheds. A major event in 1996 was about three feet higher than the 1972 and 1974 floods. Residents and business owners cleaned up and made major efforts to rebuild stronger and safer, elevating many buildings above



New school and community center facilities

the floodplain. But disaster struck again in December of 2007, with an even more catastrophic “flood of record.”

This time, infrastructure and property, including electrical substations, health care buildings, the senior center and many other critical facilities, were severely damaged or destroyed. More than 1,000 homes sustained damage and at least 100 were found to be beyond repair.

A final blow came when the

wastewater treatment facility was inundated and five feet of sewage-contaminated water poured into the elementary, middle and high school buildings.

Oregonians and the nation provided emergency assistance, including more than 1 million hours of volunteer aid, but the nearly complete loss of Vernonia’s school system cast an enormous shadow over the future of the community.

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The “Best Practices” story:

The story of recovery and triumph over this disaster involves intense determination and cooperative effort that began in the local community. The challenges were taken up by virtually all of the local leaders, local and regional business owners and countless volunteers.

Oregon’s governor appointed an **Oregon Solutions Task Force** of 36 agencies and organizations, and more than 50 individuals, to identify funding sources for a renewed school system and to develop a plan. **Their charge was to involve the community through a fair, open and participatory process that would earn the support of the whole community.**

After researching a variety of alternatives, the community agreed to build an entirely new K-12 campus and community center. The discussions led to the decision to locate the new facilities on higher ground that was partly occupied by Spencer Park. After demolition of the old school buildings, the plan specified that the park would be re-established at the flood-prone school property.

A daunting challenge was the need to raise an estimated \$40 million to accomplish the ambitious goals. The search for financial resources would include potential State of Oregon contributions. One of the many successes was an eventual \$3.8 million Oregon Department of Transportation grant.

The largest sources of funding for the school project, and for many other elements of Vernonia’s overall disaster recovery, were made possible by the coordination and collaboration of the Oregon Office of Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). These agencies were able to provide approximately



2007 “flood of record” — hours before sewage-contaminated water rose two additional feet

\$20 million in FEMA Flood Mitigation Assistance and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds, along with many additional millions through the Public Assistance infrastructure repair funding, and Individual Assistance programs.

Other federal agencies, including the Department of Energy, also helped make it possible to invest in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Platinum-rated “state of the art” buildings. The energy-efficient, durable and sustainable new facilities are now compatible with the ambitious educational program goals of the Vernonia school district.

A major foundation challenge grant was matched by corporate, small business, foundation and individual contributions from all over the state.

In a critical 2009 vote, despite severe blows to the local economy from the flood and a more general recession, voters in Columbia County and Washington County who live within the Vernonia

School District voted to approve a \$13 million school construction bond measure. In addition, the school district secured a \$5.6 million long-term, low-interest loan.

At a recent celebration of the completed school replacement project, donors and supporters who were the most responsible for achieving the ambitious goals were honored for their dedication. The superintendent of Vernonia schools summarized the spirit and motivation that brought success: **“We came together for a common purpose: Not just to build a school, but to strengthen the community.”**

Vernonia is an example of a resilient community, where people work together to anticipate and address future conditions and challenges. Investing in hazard mitigation can break the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction and repeated damage.