

Experience of 1996 helps speed Vernonia's recovery

By Edward Walsh
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VERNONIA -- Jim Tierney has been through this drill before.

Back in 1996, the last time the Nehalem River spilled over its banks and into the streets of this small logging town, Tierney improvised a system to keep track of the mounting needs of the town's flood victims and the resources available to help them. He did it on the fly, "making it up out of whole cloth," he recalled, but the system worked and it was not forgotten.

Tierney, 57, and his band of volunteers called themselves the "Unmet Needs Committee" and on Wednesday, the committee was back in session at Vernonia City Hall.

Three women bent over laptop computers in the city administrator's office as a steady stream of visitors entered, some to request aid, other to offer help. The women entered the information into a database that will be used to match what's needed with what's available.

"We're the nexus," Tierney said.

"This is a homegrown thing that people bought into," said Steve Whiteman, president of the City Council. "The class of '96 did a really good job of setting this up almost overnight. We needed one central source and we needed it to be us -- Vernonia people talking to Vernonia people."

The experience of the 1996 flood undoubtedly is helping Vernonia cope with the first stages of recovery from the 2007 flood. This time, the water rose faster and higher than it did 11 years ago.

Tierney is not the only one who has been through the drill.

As a lone police cruiser, its sides caked in mud almost to the windows, patrolled residential streets, people hauled ruined furniture and personal possessions to front porches and stacked dozens of trash bags filled with flood debris in front yards. The flood flotsam was loaded onto pickups and trailers and taken to a large open area near City Hall that serves as a temporary dump.

Robb Wilson, 52, directed traffic there, just as he had in 1996.

"I did this in the first flood, worked 96 days, and now I'm going to do it again," he said.

The town's two schools were closed Wednesday and will remain so until after Christmas, but at the Vernonia Library, town librarian Nancy Burch awaited the arrivals of children eager for a distraction during this trying time. She had just sent word that the library would show movies from its DVD collection to any children who were interested.

The idea, Burch said, was that the parents of young children, facing the urgent task of beginning to clean out their homes would welcome a warm, dry and safe place for their children to gather.

At Mariolino's Pizza, the office staff of West Oregon Electric Cooperative held a meeting over lunch. Marc Farmer, the utility's general manager, said about 2,300 people were without power in Vernonia from 4 p.m. Monday until 8:30 a.m. Tuesday and that another 1,000 to 1,200 people in outlying areas may not have power restored until Friday.

Farmer said he was the last person to leave the utility's one-story headquarters when water reached his knees in one hour. "The amazing thing was how fast the water came up," he said.

The most immediate utility problem facing Vernonia concerns fresh drinking water. The town has about 500,000 gallons available, little more than a two-day supply. The local filtration plant was not damaged by the flooding but so far, it has been unable to process the muck-filled water it has been receiving.

On Bridge Street, the main commercial artery, some businesses were open Wednesday, but many more were closed. One problem, noted Tony Hyde, was that with telephone lines and Internet service out, ATM machines and credit card processors were not functioning.

"It's a hell of a mess," he said.

Hyde is a Columbia County commissioner, but in 1996, he was mayor of Vernonia. He said this flood caused more water damage to homes and other structures than the 1996 flood but appears to have done less damage to infrastructure, such as roads.

Hyde said he worries most about older residents who remained here after the 1996 flood and are now 11 years older, many of them retired.

"This is the second time, and they don't want to go through it again," he said.

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