

Enrolled

Senate Concurrent Resolution 21

Sponsored by Senator WINTERS, Representative KOTEK; Senators BAERTSCHIGER JR, BEYER, BOQUIST, COURTNEY, DEBOER, DEVLIN, FERRIOLI, FREDERICK, GELSER, GIROD, HANSELL, HASS, JOHNSON, KNOPP, KRUSE, LINTHICUM, MANNING JR, MONNES ANDERSON, MONROE, OLSEN, PROZANSKI, RILEY, ROBLAN, STEINER HAYWARD, TAYLOR, THATCHER, THOMSEN, Representatives ALONSO LEON, BARKER, BARNHART, BARRETO, BENTZ, BOONE, BUEHLER, BYNUM, CLEM, DOHERTY, ESQUIVEL, EVANS, FAHEY, GOMBERG, GORSEK, GREENLICK, HACK, HAYDEN, HEARD, HELM, HERNANDEZ, HOLVEY, HUFFMAN, JOHNSON, KENNEMER, KENY-GUYER, LEWIS, LININGER, LIVELY, MALSTROM, MARSH, MCKEOWN, MCLAIN, MCLANE, MEEK, NATHANSON, NEARMAN, NOBLE, NOSSE, OLSON, PARRISH, PILUSO, POST, POWER, RAYFIELD, REARDON, RESCHKE, SANCHEZ, SMITH DB, SMITH G, SMITH WARNER, SOLLMAN, SPRENGER, STARK, VIAL, WHISNANT, WILLIAMSON, WILSON, WITT

Whereas 75 years ago a vibrant, bustling city sprang up seemingly overnight — it was Vanport, Oregon; and

Whereas while many living in Oregon today do not remember Vanport, at its height it was the second-largest city in the state and boasted 42,500 residents; and

Whereas Vanport was created to satisfy the desperate need of housing for the war workers pouring into Portland from all over the country, many of them recruited by the industrialist Henry J. Kaiser to supply labor for his three major shipbuilding yards; and

Whereas the housing shortage affected all incoming laborers, but due to Portland's discriminatory housing policies of the time, known as redlining, many of the African American workers could find no place to live because they were restricted to a small area of Portland that was already at capacity; and

Whereas Henry Kaiser, deciding that there was no time to wait for Portland to create a housing authority to accept funds from the federal government for low-cost temporary housing, contacted the federal government, got funding, bought 650 acres of land along the Columbia River and surprised the City of Portland in the summer of 1942 by breaking ground for a temporary city; and

Whereas Vanport was built quickly and efficiently, though with wooden foundations and thin walls, and the first 400 residents were in their apartments by Christmas of 1942; and

Whereas notwithstanding its temporary nature, Vanport strove to be a community rather than an encampment and offered shopping centers, a movie theater, parks, schools, police and fire stations, a post office, a bus station and the only public library in any wartime housing project in the nation; and

Whereas Vanport was a city of many firsts in Oregon, including being the first to hire African American police officers and teachers; and

Whereas Vanport was demographically diverse, with African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian and white populations who all came from elsewhere to work in the shipyards, and, after the war, the city was home to many Japanese Americans who returned from internment camps to find Vanport the only place they could procure housing in the Portland area; and

Whereas these groups of people found themselves all strangers together and forged new connections that endured even after Vanport was gone; and

Whereas despite being the most racially diverse city in the state, Vanport still experienced difficulties with segregation and racism, and the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP), which controlled nearly all aspects of life in Vanport, assigned African American families to particular streets in the city; and

Whereas Vanport's five elementary schools and one junior high school were considered excellent and benefited from Superintendent James Hamilton's vision in integrating the schools despite directions from the HAP to do otherwise; and

Whereas Vanport had progressive resources designed for the women performing war work, including free 24-hour day care and prepackaged foods that could be purchased on the way home from their shifts — something unheard of elsewhere in Oregon; and

Whereas as the war wound down and the shipyard jobs dried up, people left Vanport by the thousands, and the HAP began to dismantle empty apartments, reminding everyone that Vanport, never formally incorporated, had been intended only as a temporary city; and

Whereas in 1946 the emptying of Vanport proved a favorable opportunity to solve two problems: student housing and adequate buildings for a new college; and

Whereas after the war, the G.I. Bill provided a chance for many returning veterans to attend college, but the existing colleges were unable to handle the demand; and

Whereas the Vanport Extension Center, called Vanport College by many, was created as a two-year feeder college to help take the burden off four-year colleges in the state, and from the beginning, it encouraged women and minorities to enroll; and

Whereas Vanport was built on low-lying land, crossed with sloughs and ponds, that was kept dry by a surround of berms and dikes that loomed as high as 25 feet above the ground level of the town; and

Whereas exceptionally heavy snows in the winter of 1947-1948 and the cold spring that followed combined with the sudden warm-up and rains of May to decimate the snow pack and swell the Columbia River; and

Whereas although the river levels rose to alarming heights over weeks, the HAP, assured by the Army Corps of Engineers that the dikes were both strong and high enough to protect Vanport from the expected peak water levels, did not order the residents to evacuate; and

Whereas the HAP did, however, after an emergency meeting on the evening of May 29, 1948, provide a notice on each resident's doorstep telling them that they were safe at the present time, that they would have plenty of time to evacuate if there were flooding and that they should not "get excited"; and

Whereas at 4:17 p.m. the next day, Sunday, May 30, the HAP and the Army Corps of Engineers were proven wrong when a 600-foot section of the railroad berm to the west of the city failed and water began to pour into Vanport; and

Whereas although the sloughs filled up first, allowing an extra 30 to 35 minutes for evacuation, within two hours the city was under 20 feet of water; and

Whereas many residents were able to evacuate in cars and buses, but soon the water came in faster than vehicles could leave, and people had to run for their lives or wait for rescue; and

Whereas boats were launched and rescue efforts continued throughout the night and the next day, when another dike broke, cutting in half the only road in and out of Vanport, and then a third gave way; and

Whereas as they were evacuated, displaced residents were sent to Portland schools and churches, and even to the former Navy barracks, with only what little they had managed to carry with them; and

Whereas one young girl, who grew up to become Oregon Senator Jackie Winters, came away with only the clothes she was wearing, her dog Tippy and her doll, though her mother saved the family's Sunday pot roast; and

Whereas 15 people died in the Vanport flood, including a two-year-old boy and his 11-month-old sister; and

Whereas 18,500 people, about 6,300 of them African American, were left homeless and without most of their belongings; and

Whereas the property loss was in the millions of dollars; and

Whereas the survivors who were African American found it especially difficult to find places to move to in Portland, and city officials continued the redlining policies to crowd the African American residents into the Albina community; and

Whereas despite the destruction of its facilities by the flood, Vanport College became known as “the college that wouldn’t die” when it resumed classes that summer in Grant High School and then found temporary accommodation at the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation site before buying the former Lincoln High School building in downtown Portland; and

Whereas Vanport College changed its name and form over the years and continues today as Portland State University; and

Whereas after the flood, Vanport was demolished, its parts either burned, salvaged or sold, but the connections forged there still remain strong amongst the survivors to this day; and

Whereas Vanport and its flood left a legacy that still is felt today, with facets as wide ranging as the eventual integration of African Americans into Portland, the establishment of a college that would grow to be among the largest and most influential in Oregon, the provision of the impetus for the Flood Control Act of 1950 that tamed the Columbia River, and perhaps the most important of all, the creation of a strong sense of community and the Vanport spirit, described by history professor James Harrison as the idea “that we can do things, we can change things”; and

Whereas because of all this, in the words of Vanport flood survivor Edward Washington, “Vanport should never be forgotten, never be forgotten”; now, therefore,

Be It Resolved by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon:

That we, the members of the Seventy-ninth Legislative Assembly, commemorate the 69th anniversary of the Vanport flood and remember its survivors and the 15 people who lost their lives.

Adopted by Senate May 30, 2017

Lori L. Brocker, Secretary of Senate

Peter Courtney, President of Senate

Adopted by House June 20, 2017

Tina Kotek, Speaker of House