

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, 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

SUMMARY

The following summary is not prepared by the sponsors of the measure and is not a part of the body thereof subject to consideration by the Legislative Assembly. It is an editor's brief statement of the essential features of the measure **as introduced**.

Commemorates 69th anniversary of Vanport flood and remembers survivors and those who lost their lives.

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

1
2 Whereas 75 years ago a vibrant, bustling city sprang up seemingly overnight — it was Vanport,
3 Oregon; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 Whereas Vanport was demographically diverse, with African American, Hispanic, Native Amer-
26 ican, Asian and white populations who all came from elsewhere to work in the shipyards, and, after

NOTE: Matter in **boldfaced** type in an amended section is new; matter *[italic and bracketed]* is existing law to be omitted. New sections are in **boldfaced** type.

1 the war, the city was home to many Japanese Americans who returned from internment camps to
2 find Vanport the only place they could procure housing in the Portland area; and

3 Whereas these groups of people found themselves all strangers together and forged new con-
4 nections that endured even after Vanport was gone; and

5 Whereas despite being the most racially diverse city in the state, Vanport still experienced dif-
6 ficulties with segregation and racism, and the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP), which con-
7 trolled nearly all aspects of life in Vanport, assigned African American families to particular streets
8 in the city; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

45 Whereas boats were launched and rescue efforts continued throughout the night and the next

1 day, when another dike broke, cutting in half the only road in and out of Vanport, and then a third
2 gave way; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 Whereas despite the destruction of its facilities by the flood, Vanport College became known as
18 "the college that wouldn't die" when it resumed classes that summer in Grant High School and then
19 found temporary accommodation at the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation site before buying the for-
20 mer Lincoln High School building in downtown Portland; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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