Valley City State University students emptied sandbags used in the flood fight on Monday morning at the North Dakota Winter Show building as part of freshman orientation. The students in yellow are upper-class mentors. (photos by Steve Browne/VCTR)

VCSU Freshmen help dispose of sandbags

Saving a Bundle
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By Steve Browne
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Incoming Valley City State University freshmen spent Monday morning in the Winter Show building parking lot emptying sandbags used in the flood fight, as part of their student orientation.

“It’s become a tradition that our freshman class every year participate in a community service activity,” said Glen Schmalz, VCSU vice president for student affairs.

The tradition started four years ago, Schmalz said. In previous years, students have repainted fire hydrants in Valley City.

Winter Show Manager Nancy Allen said sandbags from the east side of the Winter Show building were taken to the west side, spread around the lot, and run over with a tractor to burst them open.
Students emptied the bags and put them in a dump truck for disposal at the city landfill. The sand was spread around the parking lot and in an area where a new outdoor riding arena will be built.

During spring flooding, the parking lot on the west side of the Winter Show building was severely rutted by truck traffic when the building was used as the city's Sandbag Central.

The students appeared to enjoy the work on a cool morning as they laughed and chatted with each other.

“It’s helping out the community,” said VCSU freshman Briana Powers.

Valley City Fire Chief Gary Retterath said at a rough estimate, about 40,000 sandbags were left at the Winter Show building before the students started work, though people have been taking some of them for their own use over the past few months.

In June, the Valley City City Commission awarded a bid for sandbag removal to Swanberg Construction Inc. for $663,000. Swanberg collected sandbags from city dikes and pallets left in residential areas for private property owners to put sandbags, and took them to the east and west parking lots of the Winter Show building and a vacant lot across the street.

In July, Allen told the City Commission the Winter Show cancelled three major events between March and July because of the sandbags cluttering up the parking lot.

When the City Commission was considering what to do with the sandbags in July, Barnes County Emergency Manager Kim Franklin told the commission a machine to separate bags and sand would cost about $6,000 just to set-up, and $2.75 per ton to operate.

That would come to an estimated total cost of $50,000 to $60,000.

After getting this cost estimate, city commissioners decided to use city crews to take the sandbags that were in the lot across the street to the city landfill, said City Administrator Jon Cameron.

“There’s no doubt the freshmen saved the city a lot of time and expense,” Cameron said.

In July, when methods and cost of sandbag removal were discussed, KOVC radio station reporter Steve Urness remarked, “Why don’t we just get a couple hundred volunteers up there and empty them?”

A group of about 15 volunteers from the National Relief Network came to Valley City in July to help in flood clean-up efforts and removed about 8,000 sandbags from the Winter Show parking lot.