

# City of St. Helens CITY COUNCIL

Special Session Minutes

April 15, 2021

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*This meeting was held at the Recreation Center.*

**Members Present:** Rick Scholl, Mayor  
Doug Morten, Council President  
Patrick Birkle, Councilor  
Stephen R. Topaz, Councilor  
Jessica Chilton, Councilor

**Staff Present:** John Walsh, City Administrator  
Kathy Payne, City Recorder  
Rachael Barry, Government Affairs Specialist  
Tina Curry, E2C, Tourism Coordinator (Contracted)

<b>Others:</b>	Jeremy Ruark	Stephanie Patterson
	Don Patterson	Brady Preheim
	Christina Sullivan	Tommy Sullivan
	Bill Eagle	Dana Lathrope
	Sidney Sullivan	Craig Jenk
	Claudia Eagle	Molly Matask
	Philip Stanton	Nancy Ward
	Jaime Smith	Antonia Doggett



At 5:02 p.m., Mayor Scholl opened the Special Session. The topic of this meeting is to review the tourism program and discuss future plans.

## Public Comment

\*Brady Preheim: He read his comments.

*"April 15, 2021*

*St. Helens City Council:*

*I am surprised to see a meeting on tourism, as it was just a few weeks ago that it seemed that members of the city council did not even know we had a tourism program as they asked on the record, Who is E2C, and why are we paying them \$10K ?*

*For those of us not living under a rock, we are well aware that Tina Curry, our contracted tourism director and E2C has been working in St. Helens for going on 7 years.*

*For those of us not living under a rock, noticed the 50K people that show up for Halloween each year.*

*For those of us not living under a rock, we have noticed that Halloween town EXPLODED into an internationally recognized event selected by Martha Stewart in a National magazine as the 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*best place in American to go for Halloween*

*Those of us not living under a rock know that for the 2019/2020 fiscal year, E2C made over \$18K for the city, and brought more than \$.5 million of events to our city, including 13 Nights on the River, Christmas Tree lighting, 4<sup>th</sup> of July. We also know that Halloween town alone brings in millions of dollars to our local economy. We also know that despite covid, when the entire country was shutting down, E2C had the Halloween town event. That event made MORE MONEY last year than in 2019, despite limited tickets, social distancing and the additional expense caused by covid and additional staffing - WITHOUT a SINGLE CASE of covid from these events.*

*Those of us not living under a rock also know that this event helped to saved several struggling downtown businesses that were already on the brink because of covid - some of those business even made more \$\$ in 2020 that at any other time their history.*

*Those of us not living under a rock are aware that some people don't like Halloween town. These people don't want THOSE people coming here. Halloween is not my thing either, even though it is hard to resist the urge to pull my Uhuru costume out every year...But we need jobs. We have almost no industry left.*

*Tourism is about the only thing St. Helens has going for it right now. It is not a total solution for the needed for new jobs, but it is a start in the right direction. Without it, our downtown would be closed. Pre-Tina half of downtown was empty. Now, every space is full or in development. New thriving business like Molly's Market, Running Dogs Brewery and the Plymouth Pub have opened up and are greatly needed and appreciated.*

*Those of us not living under a rock know that each year E2C brings new events to St. Helens like Kite club, Sand Island castle contest, the human gerbil balls and the LumiNights Lantern festival.*

*For those of us not living under a rock, the only tourism question you should be asking is where do we place the gold stature of Tina Curry? Do we place it in the center of the Plaza where there is already a spot for it? Or do we create a dedicated space as part of the waterfront development? Or, my favorite plan, place it in the middle of HWY 30 and Columbia Blvd with a huge welcome to Tinaville sign.*

*Sincerely,  
Brady Preheim"*

*\*Bill Eagle. He is part of the Kiwanis Club of St. Helens. He really appreciates what Halloweentown has done to the community. Thanks to Halloweentown, the service organizations have been able to help children in the community. He certainly hopes that we can continue with it. He is very happy and hopes to see it continue in the future.*

*\*Stephanie Patterson. She loves tourism. And loves what she's been able to do with tourism the past couple of years. She said that in 2020, Halloween tourism nationwide was expected to drop \$8.05 billion. That did not happen in St. Helens. We should be very proud of this. \$79 per family average four years ago...now it is up to \$90. There are a couple merchants that could not be here tonight. She read a letter from Andrew Bliss from Bemis Printing.*

*Letter from Andrew Bemis, Bemis Printing:  
"April 15, 2021*

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*I am not able to attend tonight's meeting, so I thought I would write my thoughts about Tina Curry, Tourism Director.*

*I have worked with Tina since she started with Tourism. She keeps us very busy during the summer months with printing signage, flyers, maps, cards, etc. for all the events, especially Halloweentown. Bemis Printing has been in Old Town St. Helens since the early 70's, I have been here since 2004. I have never seen more people coming through the downtown area than when her events are taking place. As a business owner in St. Helens, I know that she is increasing business and bring awareness to this town. Thank you, Tina, keep up the good work!*

*If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.*

*Andrew Bliss  
Owner  
Bemis Printing & Graphics"*

Then Patterson read a letter from Jilly Owens who owns Jilly's on First Street.

*I have been in business in St. Helens for 30 years and I have always tried to stay out of politics. My opinion was to open my business daily and treat people with respect and generosity. This, to me, is what business owners should do to represent the goodness of our St. Helens.*

*It has come to my attention that there are those who want to relieve Tina from her duties. This would be a most detrimental action for our downtown. Tina is a wonderful girl who works hard for our tourism. She has helped to make Halloweentown what it is today. People come into my store and regale our festivities! She works very hard for all of us and I, for one, appreciate her efforts!*

*Sometimes I believe politics are fueled by prejudice and hearsay. I feel this is the basis for claims against Tina.*

*To summarize, let Tina do her magic by continuing her endless hours of work and creative ideas!*

*Sincerely,  
Jilly Owens*

Patterson said that she has had the pleasure of working with Curry. Curry is very dedicated.

\*Dana Lathrope. She thinks it's great that the Council is looking at tourism. She expressed gratitude for all that Halloweentown has brought to our community. She encouraged the Council to move forward and cooperate with other groups in the city when it comes to tourism. Her only personal comment is to encourage and improve communication with the downtown businesses. Last year, there was some confusion with regards to what was going on. She just would like to have more communication.

\*Nancy Ward. She wanted to say that she supports Curry. She doesn't know why on earth there is any question about Curry continuing. She will say that when she first heard about Halloweentown, she felt it had disaster written all over it. But it didn't. From her standpoint, we all care about what happens in St. Helens. She would like to see this Halloweentown be just as successful as the last one.

Mayor Scholl explained what the purpose of this meeting is for.

Councilor Birkle said that he is very surprised. When he was running for the Council, he heard some concerns about tourism. He made a point of meeting with Curry. He listened. He is fulfilling his responsibility that he swore to, to honestly and faithfully perform his duties as best as he can. He is responsible for spending money wisely. He has a necessary duty to understand how the program runs and to discuss these things. He is not anti-Curry or anti-Halloweentown. His hope in this discussion is to discuss tourism, not just Halloweentown. Tourism is more than Halloweentown. It is more than these other activities. What is wrong with asking questions? He asks questions because he wants to understand so that he can base his decisions on the facts. If anybody has questions, he is accessible to anybody. He feels attacked.

Mayor Scholl explained what the purpose of the meeting was for and where the tourism tax dollars comes from (hotel/motel tax).

City Administrator John Walsh explained a little bit about the history of tourism. He said that he has included in the packet for this meeting the current personal services agreement with E2C and the RFP from when she was hired. Is tourism about the tourists? About the residents? Or about the local businesses that are affected by it? We want to have an active and vibrant community.

Councilor Topaz wished to clarify that this "tax" is very specific. It is a tax. The City is imposing this on a select group of people.

Tina Curry commented that the revenues generated for tourism is to cover 100% of all the expenses that it takes to create and make the events happen. The majority of the money is being spent within the community, whether it's for hiring someone in the community, or bands, or people to help with props. This is not an income stream that has ever happened in St. Helens. When she started, there was nothing for her to build upon. People want to be a part of this, but many do not want to pay. She is hired to do a job because she knows how to do it. It's not like other departments in the City. It's kind of like a contractor for the computers...you say you want the computers to work...you expect the computers to work. It's the same with tourism. Not to look under the hood to see how many guys I had to hire today to make it work. You're hiring for a result. Hopefully, I am delivering the result. If you're not happy with that, than I'd like to know.

Walsh said that we have tourism to drive the local economy. We now have high profile developers coming to our community.

Mayor Scholl said that the purpose here is to draw people to our quaint little town that is undiscovered. He's a fisherman. He mentioned that people don't know about the downtown area.

Curry said that one of the points made is important. The big event is Halloween. She's already getting emails about Halloween. Halloween is going to be from the middle of September to the end of October. A lot of people come in the spring and during Christmas because of what happens in the fall. Of course, we aren't doing Halloweentown 24/7. She is creating events that are outside of her contract. There is a Sand Island corporate team building experience. It's very hard to have all these events and not charge people. It's not that they aren't building more things for people to come here. We are competing with all the other riverfront areas. We have to keep developing wings and arms on our one centerpiece event but it doesn't have to have anything to do with Halloween. Her job is to bring people here. One of the biggest focuses she has had, from talking with merchants, is ideas to try new things.

Mayor Scholl said that since Councilor Locke got on the Council, there had been five different

tourism directors throughout the years. All last about 2-3 years. Curry has lasted longer than any of them. There's a pattern of insanity. Trying the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We do tweak it every year.

Councilor Topaz said that Curry mentioned this is a business. People want things for free. There are a number of community groups that work on doing things, such as parades. If we are going to have a business do this, we need to audit it so that we know what's going on. We need to prove it. A lot of arguments would go away. If we can't get our local community organizations to be a part of this, we are in trouble. A lot of our moneys used to be generated by the big mills. We need to be accountable.

Mayor Scholl asked Councilor Topaz to clarify if he was suggesting that the City hire Curry as a City employee? Topaz responded, "No," but that we need to see accountability. Council President Morten asked Topaz to clarify himself. Topaz said that we need something going on 360 days per year that encompasses a lot of people.

Councilor Chilton said that Halloweentown is not tourism. She said we have a lot of resources on our waterfront and that we have to look at the long-term investment of tourism. She said Halloweentown is going to die out. It cannot be the core of tourism. We have great resources here.

Mayor Scholl said, "It's not going away." He mentioned the fact that volunteers get burned out. We need other organizations to help out.

Councilor Topaz said that we used to have street dances from other groups. These things have cycles...here a few years and then they go away.

Curry agreed with Councilor Topaz and said that there are so many community members involved with everything she does for tourism. They work with the Kiwanis, Rotary, Boy Scouts, cheer teams, dance teams, etc.

Mayor Scholl asked Curry to clarify that out of the money she receives, she pays employees to help her with events. Curry said that there are so many groups in town teetering on whether or not we hold our event. There are no volunteers. She has to pay everyone. She reaches out to different groups to get them involved. Most of them just know to come to her asking how they can make money. In response to the comment that this is going to die in three years...she can't fathom that.

Mayor Scholl said that people are under the assumption that Curry gets \$120,000. The truth is that she has to hire people out of that \$120,000. The figure that she actually makes is very low.

Councilor Birkle said that he personally thinks that Halloweentown is going to be a long-lived event. Did he agree with everything the way it was done last year? He was out there often interacting with visitors. He is proud. He drops off event literature at his work in Hillsboro. He personally supports it. He doesn't think we need to talk about the position. He commended Curry for giving up money for four months of furlough. Is there a way for us to engage other people to promote some of the wonderful assets that we do have, such as the McCormick Park Disc Golf Course, the skate park, etc.? St. Helens is awash with natural beauty. It is beautiful. We have all kinds of natural flowers, trees...we are a preserve of nature. How can tourism support other areas in the city (bird watchers, nature people, etc.)? During his campaign, he spoke to Paul Vogel, of CCET, they talked that St. Helens is an event-based program. Halloweentown, 13 Nights, etc. Isn't there room to broaden that and attract other visitors?

Mayor Scholl said that Birkle paints a beautiful picture. Maybe bird watching could be through the Recreation Program or Parks and Trails. Those groups could highlight something like that. Tourism is to draw big events to the town to generate big money.

There was some discussion about things that Curry volunteers to do that are outside of her contract.

Mayor Scholl clarified that the City does not step in the way of anybody who wants to do an event. If people have ideas, they should come to the City, if they don't want to do it.

Council President Morten said that to follow up on what Councilor Birkle was talking about... Count our assets and that can be as simple as wind and water. What's happened now is that we have a kite club. With the water, we have Sand Island that is generating so much revenue for the City, compared to when the City was maintaining it. We have Dalton Lake, Nob Hill Nature Park... He thinks Curry is on board with doing those things and promoting those things. There are things that we are doing that go unrecognized where the City is involved. There are volunteer groups taking part in these things. He sees that our community is engaged. Tourism judges by the small businesses. Our small businesses are engaged in tourism.

Curry said that is one of the reasons they decided to develop the website [www.discovercolumbiacounty.com](http://www.discovercolumbiacounty.com). Literally more than 24 million people have visited that site. Anybody who wants to put things on the website can do that. There is a lot of visibility on that website. That's why we drive people for Halloweetown to the site. This is so that people will notice other things going on.

Walsh said that in 2007, the City, along with the Chamber, adopted a Sustainable Tourism Plan. In that time, there is a new County-wide tourism plan. The principle focus of that plan is outdoor recreation. He was talking to Doug at the Port of Columbia County, who said that they have had over 500 kayakers in the last two weeks. We are also looking at Salmonberry as a recreation park. Halloween is just part of the tourism program.

Councilor Birkle heard a suggestion to hold a basalt festival with all the basalt rock in our city.

Councilor Topaz suggested a geology show and said there's a lot of things in our tourism business that we aren't looking at. Halloweetown is for a specific group of people. Fishermen are a specific kind of group, too. Some of the things in our tourism have to have two purposes, welcoming and show off. We have to have a much more diverse tourism business. If you have kayaks, you need a place to put them in the water. The people that go salmon fishing...those are the people we have to go after. The thing that irritates him is that we haven't taken advantage of the water. We have some of the most fabulous water, but we don't promote sailing.

Mayor Scholl said that we don't have the infrastructure for all the things that Councilor Topaz just mentioned, such as dock space and launch space. We don't have the infrastructure. Fishermen spend a lot of money. Our future development, does have in-water stuff. That's a whole other step. The in-water is going to be another big permitting hurdle.

Walsh said that he's hearing a theme of outdoor recreation. The anchor event will always be a good thing...then we have the arms and wings that fill the rest of the year with activities.

Walsh said that the foundation of the agreement is an expectation that we pay a contract price, and we have a number of events that she does. Halloweetown is the anchor and 13 Nights is

one. If you'd like to see an expansion towards outdoor recreation, we can amend the contract to include that.

Councilor Birkle asked if other communities could help pay for the website. Curry said that her company, E2C, pays for the website. They allow other areas to advertise for free. She would rather see them spend their money in their towns.

Mayor Scholl said that up until most recently, there wasn't any discussion on tourism. It wasn't until about three years ago that other areas started recognizing tourism. They realized that tourism does benefit communities. The Halloween parade that Heather Epperly started is phenomenal.

Councilor Chilton asked if we have a tourism committee that advises the Council. She heard that there was one in the past. Council President Morten said that we did have one but that there was a lot of infighting and finger-pointing going on. It got out of hand. Chilton said that she thinks there should be an advisory committee.

Mayor Scholl said that we do this tourism meeting every year to discuss the tourism program.

There was a short discussion on whether or not the Council wants the City to continue putting on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July event.

There was discussion about what to include in Curry's contract. This contract is for promotion of events. Councilor Birkle was in favor of revising the contract because it is out of date.

There was discussion about how to tailor the contract to be either "tourism" or "event" related.

Audience member Dana Lathrope asked to speak. Mayor Scholl obliged. Lathrope said that she is a member of the Chamber and SHEDCO and it doesn't appear that the City is supporting the Chamber at this time and that that is unique to St. Helens. Mayor Scholl said that the City gave money to the Chamber and to Columbia County Economic Team (CCET). Lathrope said that the Chamber and SHEDCO organizations have both been transformed. She would like to see everyone work together.

Audience member Philip Stanton was offered an opportunity to comment. He said that he owns businesses in St. Helens. He has felt very positive in the past 24 months. The event, Halloweentown, he's watched it. You make decisions based on the numbers as far as the events you continue. He owns Mississippi Pizza in Portland. They have events and they gage the popularity of the events based on attendance. Curry is tenacious. She also buys from the businesses in town.

Audience member Toni Doggett was also offered an opportunity to comment. She said that at the St. Helens Marina, they have seen a lot of growth. There are a lot of good events going on around the river. We will build on those. All of this is a positive. It took her awhile...when citizens see change coming to their town, they worry that things are going to be taken over. She thinks we are definitely on the right track.

Curry played a recording from Jennifer Pugsley, a local business owner. She expressed support of Curry and E2C as the tourism coordinator. She encouraged the Council to reach out to local businesses to see how E2C has done.

Walsh reminded the Council that tourism is a lot more than E2C. It's a lot of other things that are

done to build up the community. Events are just part of it.

Council President Morten said that it's interesting to note that the last part of September and into October, are a lot of dead months throughout a lot of communities. This community picks up during that time and elevates into the holiday season. This is a bonus for families.

Councilor Topaz said that one of the things we are seeing with families is in downtown Portland....it's not a place to be. We could be the host to an area of relaxation.

Mayor Scholl said that the City has the Salmonberry Watershed that we have been working with the County on the possibility of opening it up to recreation more than it already is, including motorized vehicle trails for ATVs.

Councilor Topaz commented that one of the things they haven't covered is how to help the businesses up on the highway. Mayor Scholl said that he spoke to Lane, the owner of Skinny's, and he was very busy in October. Topaz stated that this Council doesn't talk about the other side of the highway that much. Councilor Birkle agreed. Scholl said that in other communities, when the downtown area is developed, the whole community thrives.

Walsh stated that the Council basically has three options:

1. Open the contract and amend it.
2. Keep the contract as is.
3. Go out for an RFP.

The Council was in concurrence to amend the current contract. Walsh said he would work on that and include it on the Council's May agenda.

The Special Session was adjourned at 7:03 p.m.



ATTEST:

/s/ Kathy Payne  
Kathy Payne, City Recorder

/s/ Rick Scholl  
Rick Scholl, Mayor