



COUNCIL WORK SESSION

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

APPROVED MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mayor Jennifer Massey
Council President Jessica Chilton
Councilor Mark Gundersen
Councilor Russell Hubbard
Councilor Brandon Sundeen

STAFF PRESENT

John Walsh, City Administrator	Aaron Kunders, Water Quality Manager
Kathy Payne, City Recorder	Sharon Darroux, Engineering Manager
Lisa Scholl, Deputy City Recorder	Alex Bird, Engineer II
Crystal King, Communications Officer	Ashley Wigod, Contracted City Attorney
Shanna Duggan, Recreation Manager	David Rabbino, Contracted City Attorney
Mouhamad Zaher, Public Works Director	

OTHERS

Steve Topaz	Dominic Maiello	Joel, Romano Properties
Brady Preheim	Nick Ries	Erin Salisbury
Jeff Humphreys	Robyn's Phone	Reed Hjort
David Lintz	Marci Sanders	

CALL WORK SESSION TO ORDER – 3:00 p.m.

CLEARING CONFUSION AND SETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

1. Response to September 3 Visitor Comments

No responses.

VISITOR COMMENTS - *Limited to three (3) minutes per speaker*

- ◆ Brady Preheim. Expressed appreciation for the comprehensive work done by staff in identifying cracks on the Waterfront project, though he voiced concern about the extensive list of issues that need repair. He also expressed concern about the Parks and Recreation Manager job description, noting it had been two years with the wrong description. He believed that since the position now only handles recreation instead of both parks and recreation, there should be a reduction in salary as it has half the responsibilities. Additionally, he raised safety concerns about the lack of railing across from the splash pad, pointing out it seemed dangerous as children could fall off the ledge.
- ◆ Steve Topaz. Spoke about free speech issues, referencing a recent shooting in Utah. He stated that in his own experience bringing problems about the sewer system and storm drains, he was considered "out of touch with the law" and that it would be "illegal" for him to talk about it, which resulted in federal court action. He noted that the federal court ruled that laws on public speaking in Oregon are illegal under the US Constitution, particularly regarding timing, subject matter, and types of words to be used.

DISCUSSION TOPICS**2. Employee Length of Service Recognition - Aaron Kunders 25 Years!**

Mayor Massey recognized Aaron Kunders who reached 25 years of service with the City on September 11, 2020. Public Works Director Mouhamad Zaher praised Kunders for his exemplary leadership, particularly highlighting his role in merging the Wastewater Treatment and Water Filtration plants into one division. Zaher emphasized that Kunders had been promoted from superintendent to Water Quality Manager and possesses irreplaceable institutional knowledge of the City's entire system.

Council President Chilton shared that she had brought her child to the treatment facility for Take Your Kid to Work Day, where they learned valuable lessons about proper waste disposal. Steve Topaz added that Kunders is "not just a good guy, he's a super guy" who works effectively between federal regulations and pollution control, and is an excellent teacher for both children and adults.

3. Quarterly Reports from City Departments/Divisions (Informational)

Council reviewed the quarterly reports. Mayor Massey noted that Communications Officer Crystal King's report was very thorough. King announced that Trunk or Treat would be held on October 25, with participation from Recreation, Library, and Police.

King and Marci Sanders shared exciting news that St. Helens Main Street Alliance had made it to the top 50 finalists for the Levitt Foundation Music grant. The grant is an in-kind matching grant for three years, up to \$40,000 per year (totaling \$120,000), to support free community concert series to activate underutilized spaces. After a community voting campaign that ended Monday, they discovered they had made the final cut. The foundation is now in a review process until November 18, which will involve securing additional letters of support from community members. If awarded, the funding would primarily go toward fairly compensating local bands and securing new bands for the "13 Nights on the River" concert series.

The Council also briefly reviewed the Recreation report, noting the after-school programs currently serve approximately 100 children. Mayor Massey emphasized the importance of these programs for the youth in the community.

**4. Review Agreement with Mackenzie for New Police Station at 1771 Columbia Blvd.
- Jeff Humphreys, Mackenzie Architect**

Jeff Humphreys from Mackenzie Architects presented the proposed agreement for the new police station to be located at 1771 Columbia Boulevard. The project had previously been planned for the Kaster Road site, but the City is now moving forward with the Columbia Blvd. location. Humphreys explained that the building design would need to be mirrored to fit the new site, with the entry now positioned in the northeast corner. A plaza would welcome people coming from Columbia Blvd., with secure parking for staff and emergency vehicles at the back of the site. Public street parking would be available along Columbia Blvd., S. 17th Street, and Cowlitz Street.

Humphreys presented the revised schedule, noting they would need to redo the design development phase due to the new site, which requires new landscaping, civil work, and land use approval. Construction is anticipated to start in the second quarter of next year with completion in fall 2027. The contract modification requested amounts to \$355,380, primarily covering the design development, land use adjustments, and value engineering changes.

Council President Chilton expressed concerns about adequate public parking, but Humphreys explained that the parking demand would be minimal since the building doesn't include a community meeting room. The facility will have a small public lobby, records desk, public restroom, and a safety room for emergencies.

Mayor Massey noted that the project had undergone significant value engineering to reduce the budget from over \$15 million to \$12.6 million. Dave Lintz, the owner's representative, confirmed they have \$1.5 million in contingency throughout the budget and the current budget is at \$12,525,000.

5. Review of Punch List Items from Downtown Projects - *Public Works Director Mouhamad Zaher*

Public Works Director Mouhamad Zaher presented a comprehensive list of punch list items for the downtown projects. He explained that the projects consist of three separate components: the R-685 (intersection at S. 1st Street and St. Helens Street), M-532 (underground utilities), and P-525 (street utilities).

Zaher reported that across all three projects, the City poured 76,000 square feet of concrete, with only 464 square feet showing cracks—representing less than 1% deficiency (99.5% of the concrete work is in good condition). He stated that the contractor has been directed to replace all cracked concrete rather than just seal it, as previous repair attempts made some areas look worse. The repairs are underway and should be completed within a month.

Additionally, Zaher addressed issues with landscaping, noting that the contractor has been ordered to redo the entire project landscaping for the third time due to inadequate work. He also mentioned problems with bollard lights along the trail that have been repeatedly vandalized. These lights have been turned off for safety reasons to prevent electrocution hazards, and the City is working with the contractor to develop protection measures.

In response to Brady Preheim's earlier comment about the splash pad area, Zaher confirmed they have met with the landscape architect to develop safety solutions, including adding some type of guard rail to prevent children from falling over the edge.

Councilor Hubbard questioned whether the concrete cracking was due to insufficient expansion joints in the design. Director Zaher acknowledged that better craftsmanship from the concrete installer could have prevented some issues, as they should have known to add joints even if not specified in the design. Engineer II Alex Bird added that the specifications did include language allowing for field adjustments to joint lines that the contractor should have followed.

Mayor Massey requested bimonthly updates on the progress of the punch list items until all are resolved.

6. Review of Proposed Exclusive Negotiating Agreement (ENA) with Romano Properties for Potential Waterfront Development - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator John Walsh introduced the proposed Exclusive Negotiating Agreement (ENA) with Romano Properties for potential waterfront development. Contracted City Attorney David Rabbino explained that the City had negotiated the final terms with Romano Properties, including an agreement that if the deal does not close, the City would reimburse the developer 50% of third-party report costs up to a maximum of \$100,000.

Joel Blanton represented Romano Properties at the meeting (as Greg Romano was unable to attend due to a personal matter). The agreement gives Romano Properties a six-month window of exclusivity to conduct due diligence, develop plans, and create concepts. Any specific land acquisition or development would require subsequent agreements.

Walsh noted that the City first met with Romano Properties in March, and the Council expressed excitement about moving forward with the partnership. The formal approval of the agreement would be on the agenda for the evening's regular session.

7. Review Proposed Rates Increases for Waste Management Drop Box Services - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator John Walsh presented the proposed rate increases for Waste Management drop box services. The franchise agreement with Waste Management has a prescriptive formula for rate adjustments, capped at 1.5% annually. Based on the current CPI of approximately 5%, the increase would default to the 1.5% maximum.

Mayor Massey expressed concern that the City has approved 1.5% increases every year since 2021, and questioned whether the Council was simply "rubber stamping" these increases without adequate review. She suggested requesting more detailed data to justify the increases and improving communication with citizens about why rates are being raised.

Nick Ries from Waste Management confirmed the 1.5% annual increase is per their agreement and mentioned they serve about 21 customers within St. Helens. He offered to follow up with more detailed information and expressed willingness to explore ways the company could support community events, similar to how they assist Vernonia, Columbia County, and Scappoose with various events.

8. Review Proposed Amendments to Parks & Recreation Manager Job Description - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator John Walsh explained that the Parks and Recreation Manager position had been separated several years ago, with parks maintenance moving to a different department. The job description was never updated, and this amendment would officially change it to Recreation Manager. Once the job description is approved, the City will conduct a pay equity study to confirm appropriate market compensation for the position.

Mayor Massey expressed appreciation for the administrative housekeeping to properly align job descriptions with actual duties.

9. City Administrator Report

- Highlighted the exciting developments with Romano Properties and the upcoming public hearing about additional property for industrial development.
- Congratulated Main Street for making the top 50 finalists for the Levitt grant.
- Represented the City at the Growing Rural Oregon Conference, discussing a \$500,000 grant (\$100,000 per year) aimed at supporting entrepreneurs, which the City directed to the Columbia Economic Team and Small Business Resource Center.
- Working with Finance Director Gloria Butsch on utility rate studies and financial planning to address the City's concerning budget forecast.
- Noted issues with the City's phone system, which is at the end of its life and not supported anymore.
- Expressed appreciation for Aaron Kunders' 25 years of service, emphasizing the value of institutional knowledge and employee commitment to the city.

ADJOURN – 4:21 p.m.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

- Labor Negotiations, under ORS 192.660(2)(d)
- Real Property Transactions, under ORS 192.660(2)(e)
- Exempt Records/Confidential Attorney-Client Privileged Memo, under ORS 192.660(2)(f)
- Consult with Counsel/Potential Litigation, under ORS 192.660(2)(h)

Respectfully transcribed by ClerkMinutes and submitted by Lisa Scholl, Deputy City Recorder.

ATTEST:

/s/ Kathy Payne
Kathy Payne, City Recorder

/s/ Jennifer Massey
Jennifer Massey, Mayor