



PLANNING COMMISSION SPECIAL SESSION

APPROVED MINUTES

Wednesday, March 22, 2023, at 4:00 PM

Members Present: Chair Steve Toschi
Commissioner Russ Hubbard
Commissioner Russ Low
Commissioner Charles Castner
Commissioner Ginny Carlson (Arrived at 5:30 p.m.)
Commissioner Jennifer Pugsley

Members Absent: Vice Chair Dan Cary

Staff Present: City Planner Jacob Graichen
Associate Planner Jennifer Dimsho
City Councilor Mark Gundersen

Others Present: None

This meeting was held in the Council Chambers.

At 4:01 p.m., Chair Steve Toschi called the meeting to order. He asked all the Commission members to go over their background and share why they joined the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Jennifer Pugsley said she had been in the County since 1994. She shared she is a real estate broker by trade for almost 30 years. She also mentioned she sits on the Historical Society Board which is why she has such a passion for historic restoration. She said she did a full historic restoration on her building at 50 Plaza Square. She mentioned she joined the Planning Commission because she was asked to be on it, and she was already attending meetings and was a stakeholder in the community. She enjoys the work.

Commissioner Russ Hubbard said he founded his construction company in 1980 focusing on restorations and developing. He said they had worked here in town for about 14 years and moved out here to be closer to family. He is currently developing the property across from the Red Apple IGA. He joined the Planning Commission in the hopes of being more involved in what the City was doing. He felt the Planning Commission could help the City make better decisions towards improvements of the City.

Commissioner Russ Low shared he had recently retired from 27 years of a large scale Commercial Construction. He said he moved to the St. Helens area in 2001 and he loves the bones of the downtown St. Helens area and what it could evolve into. He said he wanted to be involved in the Planning Commission to help influence the City and their vision. He would like to see it become like a mini Astoria.

Commissioner Charles Castner has been in St. Helens for a little over seven years. He said he works in the legal department for a large freight liner truck corporation and handles any labor and employment law for over 27,000 employees. He mentioned he lived in Charleston, North Carolina for over 16 years and sees the value in historic preservation. He currently lives in a historic home on S. 1st Street in downtown St. Helens and joined the Planning Commission to be involved in his community.

City Councilor Mark Gundersen said he moved to St. Helens in 1995. He shared his wife was a registered nurse and they have raised two children here. He said he really likes government, and wanted to be involved, so he ran for City Council. He said the liaison role is new to him and he is working hard to figure it out. He felt the Commission was working together to improve the City..

Chair Steve Toschi said he lived here for three and a half years. He met his wife in San Francisco. He mentioned she was a St. Helens native for 30 years. He said they visited her family regularly and they slowly transitioned back to living here full time. He mentioned he is an attorney. He said he was asked to join the Planning Commission by several people. He said he sees the potential of the City and thinks he can offer a lot to this group.

City Planner Jacob Graichen shared he grew up in Columbia County. He has been a professional planner for 22 years. This is his fifth jurisdiction to work as a planner, with his first being in Klamath Falls. He wanted to get a job where he grew up and always wanted to work for the City.

Associate Planner Jennifer Dimsho shared that she came into the City as an undergraduate student through the RARE program. She was brought in to help update the Parks and Trails Master Plan. The program was paid for through a stipend. She said she has always loved rural small towns and is not from here, but she sees the vision of the community and feels it is her job to make those visions come to life. She mentioned she is successful in writing grants and that has helped her in her career growth. She said she was incredibly grateful to work here.

DISCUSS THE COMMISSIONS VISION AND FUTURE OF ST. HELENS

Chair Toschi asked each member to share what they love about St. Helens.

Commissioner Hubbard said he liked it was not Portland. He enjoyed the view and the small-town aspect. He liked it was an old mill town and that it was growing.

Commissioner Castner said he really likes the river and the natural resources. He liked it was a growing community and that the downtown was walkable. He said growth is inevitable and he is excited to be a part of it.

Chair Toschi said he liked the natural environment, the river and he loves fishing. He enjoyed the wildlife and that there was lots of park land. He said he loved the people here and wanted to see the small town preserved while it is going through growth.

Commissioner Low said he also loved the closeness of the river. He said there was no other community like St. Helens and he wanted to preserve the small town feel. He loves that it is an old logging and shipbuilding town and wants to preserve that history.

Councilor Gundersen said he loves to fish and being close to the river makes it easier. He loves all the downtown and old buildings. He said the community is great and all the sports and activities he was involved in make it even better. He said St. Helens is a hidden gem and has a very easy commute.

Commissioner Pugsley said she liked the small town. She works on the plaza and loves to see the reactions of tourists when they see the old courthouse and all the filming locations. She would like to see tourism expand. She wants to see St. Helens become more of a destination and for it to become more welcoming of small business. She would like to see it incentivizing historic preservation.

There was a discussion on the waterfront redevelopment site. Chair Toschi shared what type of housing and people he would like to see moving into that housing on the riverfront. Commissioner Pugsley would like to see more hotels or a diverse mix of restaurants and places to shop to keep the tourists engaged. Commissioner Castner would like to see more options for those who work from home, as this is the new trend for work models.

There was a discussion on the previous meeting and the public hearings that took place. They discussed how the decisions of the Variances and Conditional Use Permit were made and how there could have been better communication.

There was a discussion about architectural standards and implementing changes to the Development Code to be able to use these standards in all their decisions.

Commissioner Carlson felt it was important to the community and to each other to be respectful and supportive of each participant in the Planning Commission. She wanted to see the Commission become more respectful of staff time as well. She really likes historic preservation and has lived in this community for over 20 years and seen some growth. She shared her background in working with those who are underrepresented and that she is a huge advocate for equity and inclusion.

Commissioner Pugsley shared she would like to re-envision the Planning Commission's roles. She said some of the communication from Chair Toschi is aggressive in nature and for individuals who do not like conflict it, can feel uncomfortable. Chair Toschi discussed Robert's Rule of Order. He mentioned there will be times when there is conflict and there may be times they do not agree, but he wants them to be able to work together. Commissioner Castner said he would like to see more efficient meetings. Commissioner Low agreed and said he would like to see people not get off subject but stay on course and be more efficient. Dimsho mentioned some of the ways to help them move forward is to allow Staff to run through the report. They have already placed out items that are important and want to help the Commission not have to repeat things over.

The Commission agreed they would like to see a summary of items that Staff feel are the most important to highlight with each staff report.

There was a discussion about how the Commission can make better findings and when it is important to clarify findings.

The Commission changed the discussion to HB 3115. Chair Toschi talked about the house bill and things he has already shared about it previously.

There was some discussion on the current law. They also discussed whether or not there should be identified and designated property for the homeless to be able to camp. Commissioner Castner and Commissioner Carlson felt this was an important piece to the puzzle.

There was more discussion about the rules and how to move forward.

There was a small discussion about how to start discussing residential architectural standards.

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned at 7:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Christina Sullivan
Community Development Administrative Assistant*