



COUNCIL WORK SESSION

Wednesday, January 21, 2026

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
Lisa Scholl, Deputy City Recorder
Crystal King, Communications Officer
Matt Smith, Police Chief
Kolten Edwards, Police Detective
Mouhamad Zaher, Public Works Director
Ashley Wigod, Contracted City Attorney

OTHERS

Erin Salisbury	Nick Hellmich	Steve Topaz
Adam St. Pierre	Joel Haugen	Steve Toschi
Robyn Toschi	Sarah Lu Heath	Scott Jacobson
Jenni Gilbert	Brady Preheim	Tina Curry
Paul Vogel	Jacquie Puett	Jenn Farrington Dougherty
Joe	Steve Denari	KATU News

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

CLEARING CONFUSION AND SETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

1. Response to January 7 Visitor Comments

Mayor Massey reported there were no responses to visitor comments from the January 7 meeting.

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

- ◆ Scott Jacobson, Park and Trails Commission. Spoke about a site visit, requesting RSVPs from Council members. He mentioned that the Port would also be attending and this was his second attempt to coordinate the visit, scheduled for January 31.
- ◆ Steve Topaz. Asked about the legal fees spent by the City last year and why it was not answered from the last meeting. He expressed concerns about the waterfront development plans, specifically regarding apartments on the waterfront. He mentioned previous developers' proposals, including one that was rejected. Topaz urged the Council to review the Maul Foster reports regarding environmental issues at the waterfront, noting that toxic waste had been found during line installation that was not highlighted in the reports. He also expressed concern about

setbacks from the waterfront being reduced from the original 100 feet to 35 feet and potential traffic problems from the proposed development.

- ◆ Adam St. Pierre. Raised concerns about a potential conflict of interest with a Budget Committee member, Steve Toschi, who had inquired about legal expenses set aside for a tourism contractor during last year's budget meetings and is now reportedly representing that same contractor in a claim against the City. He suggested the City consult with the Oregon Ethics Commission on this matter.
- ◆ Jenni Gilbert. Addressed concerns about ethics and public representation, particularly criticizing the Mayor's behavior on social media toward citizens and a former employee who has filed a retaliation claim. She expressed that the Mayor's social media behavior, along with a group of allies including spouses of police officers, creates an atmosphere of intimidation. The Council has the authority to control that behavior. Gilbert also raised concerns about a conflict of interest regarding the Mayor advocating for police funding while being married to a police officer.
- ◆ Brady Preheim. Directed comments to Councilor Gundersen about the Mayor being "in crisis" and needing an intervention based on her social media behavior. He criticized the Mayor for not addressing the cessation of 24/7 police coverage despite demanding the previous mayor resign over the same issue. He also questioned the hiring process of Police Chief Smith, noting the unprecedented use of an NDA in the hiring process and the lack of transparency regarding scoring. Preheim also commented on plans for Main Street to take over CET operations, arguing this was inappropriate given Main Street's limited scope. He also spoke about the side-by-side ordinance being ridiculous.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

2. **Update from Columbia Pacific Economic Development District on Regional Economic Development Programs - Sarah Lu Heath, Executive Director & Jacquie Puett, Program Coordinator**

Sarah Lu Heath, Executive Director of Columbia Pacific Economic Development District (COLPAC), presented an overview of the organization and its services. She explained that COLPAC serves Columbia, Clatsop, Tillamook, and parts of Washington County, with a mission to diversify and strengthen the economy and livability in Northwest Oregon.

Heath outlined their programs including:

- Grant writing and administration, particularly Community Development Block Grants
- Small Business Loan Program (\$700,000 currently available)
- Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE) financing for energy efficiency projects
- Brownfields Redevelopment Program for contaminated or underperforming properties
- Northwest Oregon Transit Alliance administration
- Transportation Options program
- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy development

She noted that COLPAC had not updated its membership dues since its founding in 1994 and is likely to request an increase due to the closure of Columbia Economic Team (CET). Heath clarified that while COLPAC had a shared employee agreement with CET, they operated with completely separate Boards.

Council members inquired about what specific services COLPAC had provided to St. Helens over the years and how COLPAC would fill gaps left by CET's dissolution. Heath explained they hope to increase grant writing services and provide more flexible support to communities with increased membership dues.

3. Discussion about Lease of Sand Island

City Administrator Walsh reported that City staff had recently met with the Sand Island operator and conducted a thorough inspection of the facilities. The team consolidated their findings into a report that was not yet ready for this meeting.

Contracted City Attorney Wigod recommended that before presenting the report to Council, the City should meet with the operator to review the items and discuss solutions. She advised providing an update at the next meeting about the timeline rather than setting a specific date for presenting all solutions.

Council emphasized the importance of resolving these issues promptly and keeping the public informed.

4. Review Draft of Side-by-Side Ordinance

Contracted City Attorney Wigod presented a draft ordinance allowing Class 4 all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) on city streets with certain conditions and regulations. The ordinance would be placed in City Code Chapter 10.24.

Key points of the ordinance include:

- Permits required for operators with valid driver's licenses, 18+ years of age
- Oregon state permit and ATV safety education certificate required
- Insurance requirements matching state minimums
- Safety equipment requirements
- Hours of operation restrictions
- Highway 30 restrictions with limited crossing options

Discussion centered on several aspects of the ordinance:

- Whether to specify a designated crossing point on Highway 30 (Police Chief Smith recommended Gable Road due to the traffic light, though Council President Chilton expressed concerns about this location)
- Whether the permit should be for two years (as proposed by Mayor Massey) with a fee of \$200
- Clarification on ownership requirements versus operator requirements
- Enforcement mechanisms and fee structures

The Council and Police Chief Smith discussed how violations would be handled through Municipal Court. Mayor Massey suggested a graduated fine structure: \$100 for first violation, \$250 for second, and \$500 with 12-month permit revocation for third violations.

The Council agreed to have the Municipal Court review the draft and to bring an updated version to the next Council meeting.

5. Update from Police Chief Smith - An update for the City of St. Helens specifically pertaining to the volume of cases the St. Helens Police Department is seeing involving sexual abuse crimes, including crimes against children. This includes, but is not limited to, sexual assault, child exploitation, and child pornography.

Police Chief Smith and Detective Edwards presented on sexual abuse crimes investigations in St. Helens, particularly focusing on crimes against children. They explained the investigation division's current staffing, being just the two of them, and workload.

Their primary responsibilities include:

- Department of Human Services cross reports (receiving approximately 110 reports over a three-month period)
- Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) referrals
- Computer forensic extractions and analysis
- Complex investigations including rape, sexual abuse, and fraud cases

The presenters detailed the forensic interview process, which involves traveling to child advocacy centers where victims may be located. They showed statistics on their caseload, noting a spike in overtime during the St. Helens School District investigation when they worked 6-7 days per week for about three months.

Detective Edwards explained the ICAC investigation process, which typically takes 12-18 months from start to finish. The process involves receiving referrals from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children via the Oregon Department of Justice, drafting search warrants, conducting surveillance, executing search warrants, and coordinating forensic examinations of digital devices. They noted that one recent case involved analyzing a device with 290,000 images.

When asked how St. Helens compares to surrounding areas, Chief Smith indicated that in his experience, St. Helens has a higher volume of child abuse referrals than Forest Grove, which has a larger population. He also mentioned that St. Helens is more advanced in investigating ICAC cases than some neighboring departments, including Scappoose.

Chief Smith advised parents to be cautious about children using platforms like Roblox and Discord, as many of their referrals come from these platforms. Council members expressed interest in another educational presentation for parents similar to a previous well-received social media safety event.

6. Discussion regarding CET Programs - *City Administrator John Walsh*

Paul Vogel provided an update on the dissolution of Columbia Economic Team (CET). He explained that the CET board had voted to dissolve on January 17, with all employment terminated on January 31. Vogel is under contract to manage the administrative wind-down.

He reported that about 80% of the approximately \$600,000 in program funds are being redirected to other entities:

- The GRO program grant (\$93,000 remaining from \$100,000) will return to the City of St. Helens
- The Innovation Hub grant (\$275,000) will be managed by Oregon Entrepreneurs Network
- The ROI grant (\$105,000) is likely to be transferred to the City of Scappoose with a county-wide scope
- Some grants could not be transferred, including an \$81,000 USDA grant

Council expressed interest in ensuring that important programs like GRO, Keep it Local, and tourism initiatives would continue. Walsh mentioned that conversations with City of Scappoose, Port of Columbia County, and Columbia River PUD were ongoing to find ways to preserve these programs.

Erin Salisbury, the new Executive Director of Main Street, clarified that while Main Street is place-based and focused on St. Helens' historic downtown districts, they would like to be part of conversations about county-wide economic development.

The Council requested this topic be included on the next agenda for updates.

7. Discussion regarding Budget Committee Positions

The Council discussed reappointing Ivan Salas, whose term on the Budget Committee was expiring. It was confirmed that Salas was interested in being reappointed and had not yet served two full terms, which is the limit according to City policy. The Council agreed to formally reappoint him at the upcoming regular session.

8. Report from City Administrator John Walsh

- The Project Arcadia deal has been successfully closed, paving the way for the mill's anticipated reopening, which is expected to significantly benefit the community economically.
- Romano Capital's development discussions are making good progress, with a public reveal of massing studies, inclusive of hotel, retail, and housing components, slated for March.

- Planning for the new police station is moving forward, with an important March deadline for code change submissions.
- The reservoir project appraisal process has begun.
- The City has successfully appealed a stormwater violation, leading to a considerable reduction in fines, and is now considering environmental benefit projects in lieu of monetary penalties.
- The Parks & Trails Commission is actively reviewing the trails master plan with an eye on potential updates.
- In terms of tourism, planning for community events is ongoing.
- A dedicated "purge day" was recently conducted at City Hall to clear out old records, allowing for better organization.
- The City's general fund budget is under scrutiny, with potential one-time revenue injections needed to balance it by year-end.
- Department heads are convening weekly to explore cost-saving strategies, which may include freezing positions and reducing services.
- February 2 has been marked for Water Day at the Capitol, where efforts will be made to seek state funding.
- Today marks the start of the "If I Were Mayor" contest, which will run until March.
- Senator Merkley's visit on January 16 highlighted grant and spending initiatives, and similar activities are anticipated during Senator Wyden's visit on Saturday in Columbia City.
- The City currently faces a significant leak adjustment appeal for a large complex.
- An alien exhibit and additional equipment inventories are being assessed, with discussion about surplus.
- Celebratory plans for Project Arcadia's contributions and operations, such as a potential ribbon cutting, are being coordinated with community partners, showcasing excitement about the mill's reopening.

ADJOURN – 5:26 p.m.**EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- ORS 192.660(2)(d) To conduct deliberations with persons appointed to carry out labor negotiations
- ORS 192.660(2)(e) To conduct deliberations with persons designated by the governing body to negotiate real property transactions
- ORS 192.660(2)(f) To consider information or records that are exempt by law from public inspection
- ORS 192.660(2)(h) To consult with legal counsel concerning the legal rights and duties of a public body with regard to current litigation or litigation likely to be filed

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

ATTEST:

/s/ Lisa Scholl
Lisa Scholl, Deputy City Recorder

/s/ Jennifer Massey
Jennifer Massey, Mayor