



COUNCIL WORK SESSION

Wednesday, April 15, 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	Suzanne Bishop, Library Director
Kathy Payne, City Recorder	Gloria Butsch, Finance Director
Lisa Scholl, Deputy City Recorder	Crystal King, Communications Officer
Matthew Smith, Police Chief	Ashley Wigod, Contracted City Attorney

OTHERS

Alex Bubar	Steve Topaz
Robyn Toschi	Brady Preheim
Steve Toschi	Scobby
Jan Zuccarini	Honalee Mitchell

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

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

City Recorder Payne explained the conflict of interest declaration process, noting that potential conflicts must be disclosed but allow participation, while actual conflicts must be declared and prohibit discussion or voting. She referenced Senate Bill 983 from 2025, which permits local officials to participate in budget discussions involving their own compensation after declaring an actual conflict.

Mayor Massey declared an actual conflict of interest because her spouse is employed by the City as a police officer. She cited ORS 244.120 as amended by Senate Bill 983, stating she may participate in budget discussions after making this disclosure, though no budget matters were on today's agenda.

CLEARING CONFUSION AND SETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

1. Responses to April 1, 2026 Visitor Comments

Mayor Massey clarified there were no responses to visitor comments from April 1, 2026.

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

- ◆ Robyn Toschi spoke about her childhood memories of the St. Helens Library and emphasized the importance of books and library access to the community. She expressed concern about the city potentially losing its library due to financial mismanagement, noting that while the police force has grown by 50% over ten years with only modest population growth, the library faces cuts. She urged the Council to prioritize the library over excessive police staffing.

- ◆ Steve Toschi presented budget analysis data, revealing that the City ended fiscal year 2024-25 with only \$92,000 in the General Fund, down from \$1.5 million previously. He noted that while population grew 7.7% over ten years, the police budget grew 134%. He criticized the trend of transferring money from other funds like sewer and water to support operations, warning this compromises infrastructure. He announced plans to provide AI-generated budget analysis to Council members.
- ◆ Brady Preheim addressed City Administrator Walsh directly, stating he generally supports Walsh's performance but criticized his tourism director responsibilities. He called the water tax RFP "horrendous" and suggested Walsh hire competent help for tourism matters. He raised concerns about selling assets during pending litigation and noted that tourism actually lost \$98,000 when all transfers are considered.
- ◆ Steve Topaz. (verbatim) "I brought this up a number of times, and it has surprising importance now. Last meeting, I used 2 time slots. I brought two different critical points. And when you read the minutes from the last meeting, you'll find that the two critical points are missing. I also attended this last Saturday's meeting on the General Fund. And, again, I noticed a number of things missing. The first thing that I found missing was why are we having a financial problem? Obviously, the problem was caused by somebody. It may be a number of problems and a lot of these problems, of course, well before the mayor got here. Not here because of this problem. I don't mean we don't have enough money to pay. I mean, why don't we have enough money to pay? Good. But something else is obvious is that we're not putting responsibility to who caused the problem. Let's look at the police station. It was designed, and the bond issue was by John Walsh's assistant, Matt Brown, and things got done before the City Council had a say in it. And, when at that time, I was on the council and I brought up the problems with the bond, I was told that wasn't true. After we've gotten going, we found out that what I said was true. The bond is very specific to the police station. After, we had some financial problems with the waterfront, it was mentioned that they could use the bond issue for the police station for the waterfront. I raised those questions, and I was told it was being taken care of. We found that isn't true. In fact, we're paying a fine on that. Okay. Let's go back to Matt Brown. Matt Brown finally left here and we hired our old financial director for a period of time to straighten out the books. And in that period of time, he straightened out some of them but couldn't straighten out the others. All of these things are financial problems. We have financial people who basically couldn't do the job. We have financial problems that were generated, had to be done by John Walsh. He's the person running the boat. The responsibility is the council. So when it comes to advising or telling people how they should vote for this monies with the water business. I would recommend strongly no monies until we find out what the problems are, who the people are who caused them, and either how to correct the problems or how to get somebody who can. Thank you."
- ◆ Jan Zuccarini spoke passionately about the library as an education and support system for the community. As a former educator, she emphasized that many community members who rely on the library may not speak up publicly, comparing them to students in the back of the classroom. She praised the exceptional service provided by part-time library staff and expressed dismay at proposed cuts.
- ◆ Honalee Mitchell requested help with a rat problem at 495 N. 10th Street that affects four properties. She was told to pursue small claims court by the Code Enforcement Officer but learned that position may be eliminated. She asked the Council not to eliminate code enforcement while she's trying to resolve this health issue.

Council President Jessica Chilton acknowledged the heartfelt sincerity of the comments. Mayor Massey echoed this sentiment and recognized both library concerns and code enforcement issues, noting she had seen photos of rats "bigger than my daughter's chihuahua." Police Chief Smith indicated they would develop a plan to handle code enforcement duties when that position is eliminated.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

2. Employee Length of Service Recognition - Kathy Payne 25 Years!

Mayor Massey praised City Recorder Payne for reaching 25 years of service, noting how many responsibilities she handles and calling her work "truly commendable."

City Administrator Walsh described Payne as representing stability with impeccable organizational skills and invaluable institutional knowledge. Council President Chilton called her "the mama bear of the City" who makes every room feel brighter and warmer. Councilor Sundeen noted that Payne was the first person he spoke with when considering running for council and emphasized how often council members say "let's ask Kathy." Councilor Gundersen praised her for always having answers to questions, while Councilor Hubbard appreciated her wealth of knowledge and guidance.

3. Quarterly Reports from City Departments/Division - Library & Police (Informational)

Library Director Bishop presented the quarterly library report. Mayor Massey thanked her for the comprehensive data and information she provides to the Library Board. Councilor Sundeen praised Bishop's knowledge and responsiveness. Mayor Massey highlighted Bishop's encouraging other libraries to seek funding despite St. Helens' own financial challenges, showing her passion for libraries generally.

Bishop explained that the proposed layoffs would eliminate 80 hours per week of service and 27 years of combined experience from part-time staff, who handle front desk duties plus Safety Committee work, volunteer management, promotional materials, program support, and room management.

Bishop described the new Teen Advisory Board, which had 13 teens at its first meeting including homeschoolers from various backgrounds. The group learns Robert's Rules and life skills while planning programs like music events and game nights. They're developing arts and music subgroups and will help with summer library challenges. Mayor Massey expressed interest in potentially connecting this group to a future youth council initiative.

Police Chief Smith reported 4,388 calls for service during the quarter (December 3, 2025 to March 20, 2026), including significant numbers of welfare checks, suspicious circumstances, domestic disturbances, thefts, and sexual assaults. He highlighted the recovery of two missing children and an ongoing stabbing investigation at Broadleaf apartments. The entire Police Department was recertified in emergency vehicle operation control training through collaboration with Washington County Sheriff's Office.

Regarding side-by-side ordinance enforcement, Chief Smith reported no complaints or calls for service. Council President Chilton asked about fleet lease changes, but Chief Smith was unaware of any modifications to their vehicle program.

4. Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Audit Letter & Report (Informational)

City Administrator Walsh noted this was a clean audit conducted by Connor Delaney, who has audited the City for several years. He expressed appreciation for higher ending fund balances while acknowledging they're working to improve the financial situation.

Mayor Massey confirmed the auditor is on the state's certified auditor list as required for municipalities. Finance Director Butsch, participating remotely, emphasized that the ending fund balance was only 1% and significantly less than budgeted, which affects the current year's budget situation.

5. Continued Discussion regarding Community Day in the Park - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator Walsh reported that the event organizers have spent about 75% of their budget and offered to waive the remaining \$2,500 fee to help the City's budget situation. Since sponsors and food donations are already arranged, canceling would waste the \$6,000 already spent.

Councilor Sundeen agreed it made no financial sense to cancel but suggested discussing whether to continue the event next year given the compressed schedule with other events like the Fourth of July. Council President Chilton noted community expectations for City participation in such events. The Council reached consensus to proceed with Community Day this year.

6. Discussion Regarding Cancellation of Joint Meetings with Boards and Commissions

City Administrator Walsh explained this was a cost-saving measure, as producing agendas and minutes for meetings requires significant resources. The Parks and Trails Commission expressed strong desire for at least one joint meeting annually, potentially replacing one of their regular meetings. Planning Commission had similar interest.

Currently, the schedule includes Library Board meetings in August and February, Parks and Trails in April and October, and Planning Commission in March and September. Councilor Sundeen suggested moving to once annually per commission, with the joint meeting replacing a regular meeting that month. The Council provided clear direction to City Recorder Payne to work with commissions on scheduling annual joint meetings.

7. Review Request for Proposals (RFP) for Water Taxi Services - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator Walsh explained the RFP seeks a local operator before pursuing sale of the boat. The evaluation criteria weights local economic benefits 60% and technical requirements 40%. Insurance requirements match previous operations at \$5 million. The boat currently lacks proper documentation, creating compliance issues, though brokers believe there are workarounds.

Mayor Massey noted the RFP photos show more passengers than the 12-passenger plus operator limit, though Walsh clarified those were from when it operated with proper certification. The RFP will be released within a week with a three-week response period. Council expressed consensus to proceed, giving local operators an opportunity before considering sale.

8. Review Memo regarding Disposal Method of Fisheagle Osprey Vessel - *City Administrator John Walsh*

City Administrator Walsh outlined disposal options including auction, bids, liquidated sale, or fixed price sale through a broker. If the boat is leased rather than sold, it remains City property and doesn't require surplus. Boat brokers visited and will provide valuation within days.

Contracted City Attorney Wigod recommended Council authorize Walsh to evaluate disposal methods and recommend the best approach. Mayor Massey asked about minimum bid requirements; City Recorder Payne explained that fixed price sales allow setting minimums while auctions can include reserves.

9. Review Criteria for Evaluation of City Administrator

City Recorder Payne, joined by Contracted City Attorney Wigod, presented the comprehensive evaluation process developed with HR professionals and based on similar jurisdictions. The evaluation covers six categories: budget and cost control, operations management, staff management, intergovernmental relations, community relations, and mayor/council relations. Each uses a 1-5 scale from "does not meet expectations" to "outstanding."

The two-year review period accounts for the absence of recent evaluations. The process includes self-assessment by the city administrator, input from department directors, individual council member evaluations, compilation by the city attorney, and executive sessions for discussion and final evaluation.

The timeline begins with Council adoption of criteria, evaluations due May 8, executive session review May 20, a second session with the administrator, and final approval by resolution in open session.

Councilor Gundersen confirmed the criteria are consistent with other municipalities. Mayor Massey appreciated how the questions could potentially apply to other positions as well. The Council expressed satisfaction with the thorough process.

10. Report from City Administrator John Walsh

Walsh thanked Payne for her 25 years of service and reported that Saturday's State of the City meeting went well with good community engagement. He noted the audit completion provides the needed beginning balance figures.

Walsh announced he sent layoff notices to eight employees on Friday, extending the effective date to June 21 to provide maximum notice beyond contractual requirements. The 10% pay reduction begins in the same pay period. The City is also preparing contingency plans if the CCOM-911 levy fails, which could cost the City over \$500,000 annually.

Service impacts may include reduced hours, possible Friday closures at City Hall, and modified library operations due to staffing reductions. Walsh noted he serves multiple roles including community development director and tourism director, creating significant time demands.

He reported on various development activities including coordination with Columbia Business Alliance, monthly Columbia County Coalition meetings, and participation in regional transportation and economic development organizations. Three of five regional ODOT projects are planned for Highway 30, with St. Helens championing the Gable Road intersection improvement.

Project updates included completion of downtown streetlight repairs at no additional cost, sewer capacity project design underway with bids due May 12 for the \$20-22 million project, reservoir project appraisals received for the 12-acre property acquisition, and police station permits approved with early demolition bidding planned for May 20.

Walsh reported CRPUD identified significant electrical cost savings for the police station by changing from pole-mount to pad-mount service. He discussed plans for an 82-foot decorative fence at the police station plaza, with Councilor Hubbard proposing historical panels depicting St. Helens history from Lewis and Clark to present, to be created through Oregon Corrections Institute's metalwork program.

Additional updates included TSP kickoff meetings progressing well, community pathways grant resuming after being paused, industrial park substation feasibility studies continuing, and ongoing work with Romano and Arcadia developments. He noted a landslide on the bluff trail that the engineering firm assessed as stable enough for continued public access with caution.

ADJOURN – 4:36 p.m.

EXECUTIVE SESSION – Not Held

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