

BACKGROUNDER

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City of St. Helens History, Strategic Planning and Economic Development

As the population of St. Helens grows and changes, so does the culture and economic future of this once bustling port and mill town. City commissions now include waterfront development committees, a bicycle and pedestrian commission, and an arts & cultural commission. Adding to the momentum; a city council energized by new members, a civic vitality spurred by strategic planning and community activism, and city staff utilizing urban renewal and other programs to bolster development and quality of life for residents and visitors.

Today St. Helens is mostly considered an exurban town, feeding commuters into the Portland Metropolitan area while natural resource based industries fade away.

“We still have mills and timber related trades,” says Community Development Director Skip Baker, “But more than half the residents commute outside the county to work.” Less than ten percent of the workforce works in natural resource based jobs. The population of St. Helens has grown steadily at about 3.5% over the last 10 years.

The city has experienced economic booms, busts, and population fluctuation. Between 1834 and 1900 the Olde Towne area was settled. It grew into a shipping destination. The town of Milton was established near the mouth of Milton Creek, near the current transfer station on Railroad Avenue. This was centered around a saw mill. Another small town, Houlton, was established at what is now Columbia Blvd and Hwy 30.

By 1913, the City of St. Helens included the area where Milton had been prior to flooding, the city of Houlton, and lands west of Hwy 30. The city was spurred on by logging, lumber mills, ship-building, river trade, quarries, and farms. Since the early 1900's St. Helens has grown slowly, with most employment related to forest products until the last couple of decades as more and more residents are commuting to the Portland area. The City experienced a spurt of community growth in the 1950's with the City adopting its first zoning plan; a new local well for the City's water system was constructed; with a new hospital planned and built; with major improvements to the paper mill; and with a new high school built. In the 1990's and continuing the City has again experienced major growth with two new elementary schools; another new well; major expansion of Highway 30 to five lanes and significant population growth.

The City of St. Helens has been working on methods to improve the overall economic health of the city. The "St. Helens Strategic Plan" and the "St. Helens Economic Development Plan" recommend actions and policies to improve economic conditions, with a particular focus on the Olde Towne, Houlton and Highway 30 business districts.

The city is moving forward with urban renewal, tourism initiatives, and economic development initiatives for drawing new business to the area.

Currently, St Helens is home to 430 licensed businesses that along with public agencies provide over 3,500 local jobs.

Based upon Portland Metro Area economic forecasts, more tech and service businesses to are expected to locate in St. Helens over the next 20 years. City and county governments, leisure, and tourism are expected to grow too.

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