

ANNOUNCER: You've tuned in to another edition of The Break Room. a

weekly conversation about how the City of St Augustine works from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the

City of St Augustine's Communications Director,

Melissa Wissel. The Break Room offers a closer look at the

different City departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events.

And now your host, Melissa

Wissel. MELISSA: Welcome to The Break Room. We're back with our

fourth City Commissioner interview and this particular

guest is one of our newest commissioners. She's no

stranger to City of Augustine
Government. She worked for the

city for 13 years and retired
in 2021 as the Facilities

Coordinator. This commissioner
also worked for St Johns

County Clerk of Courts for 10
years. She's a financial

adviser for the University of
Phoenix and oversaw more than
400 students to ensure they
were financially able to

graduate. She has a Bachelor of
Science in Marketing and a

Master's Degree in
Organizational Management, but

that's not the most important
part. Most important part, she

is making history. She is our
first black female elected

commissioner, not just for the

City of St Augustine but

also in St Johns County, and

she is also the first ever City

employee to go on to serve in

public office. If you haven't

figured it out yet, allow me to

introduce Commissioner Cynthia

Garris. Welcome to The Break

Room, Commissioner. CYNTHIA: Thank you

so much for having me here

today. MELISSA: First off,

congratulations. CYNTHIA: Thank you.

MELISSA: We're so fortunate to have you

representing us. Tell us a

little bit, before we get into

how life is now as a

Commissioner. Tell us a little

bit about yourself. You were

born here, went to public

schools, you spent some time in
Rhode Island, you're back in

St Augustine. Tell us a
little bit about who Cynthia

Garris is. CYNTHIA: Yeah, I was born
here at the Flagler Hospital,

which was located on Marine
Street, at that time to my proud

parents of Sam and Hazel Boyd.
And then after that, they moved

to Rhode Island when I was two.
And I started, after that they, I

came back here and attended
first grade at Webster. And I

had a great teacher Mrs.
Haliard excuse me. And after

that, I returned to Vernon with
my family and then I came back

here for visits with my
grandparents. I actually live in

my grandmother's house now. And
I came back and went to high

school, and I was within, with
the class of 1978. MELISSA: Wow. So

back and forth, but you just
couldn't stay away. CYNTHIA: Nope,

couldn't stay away. MELISSA: St
Augustine is your home. CYNTHIA: Yes, I

sat there one day and divided
the time and I've been more of

a Floridian than a northerner.

I moved back here in

1990. Two of my
cousins unfortunately got

killed in an accident, and when
I came home. I saw my former, a

friend of mine, and we got it
reacquainted. And we got.. he came

and got me. I came in
January and he came and got me

in April. And I moved here,
decided to be smart and live

with him for about ten months to make
sure that was a good move. Because I had children.

And in 1991, we got

married and we were blessed
with 23 years before he passed

away. MELISSA: Wonderful. Well, that's a,
that's heartwarming and I'm

glad that we got you back here.
So, you've seen this City

evolve over many years.
You talked a lot about it

during your campaign. Let's do
a little refresh, recap. What

are some of the things that
impress upon, that you see or

that are most impressed on your
own experiences, that you see

that, you said I I want to see
some change and I'm going to

run for office? And tell us a
little bit about that. CYNTHIA: Well,

there's a couple of things. One
is this is a beautiful City and

everyone that lives here is
really blessed to live here in

St Augustine. We see, every
time the tourists come, next

thing they are moving here.
It's very quaint. We don't

have a high crime rate. We have
some excellent police officers

with the Sheriff's Office and
the City Police. So, we don't

have lot of crime. So
actually when there is crime,

it's actually kind of shocking.

It's like if, comparing

it to Jacksonville, where it's

like again..? So, we are very

fortunate and blessed far as

that's concerned. As far as the

main reason why I ran for

office is because since Vice

Mayor Earl Jones, you know, no

longer became in the Commission

and he now he's passed away.

Rest his soul. Bless his soul.

But, hasn't been any any
representation on the west side.

And I want to see some changes
over there because sometimes

the people that reside over
there, including myself, felt

like it was the forgotten City.

And so, during the course of

that, the house that I live in
was built in 1955, and why they

didn't make sidewalks at that
particular time, I have no idea.

And the people are aging
because there's still some

people that live there that
long and they're aging and they

don't want to go because
there's no sidewalks. They have

to walk in the middle of the
road. And then there's

the lighting is not well. And
as we know, lighting prevents

burglaries. And people
feel safe. So they don't even

go out at night because they
don't feel safe. And if

if getting sidewalks and things

of that nature would ensure

their safety, so that they can
go visit their friends. I

know a gentleman named Mr.
Tommy Harrington. He lives

behind me on Christopher Street
and he comes on my street to

visit a relative. And he
literally had a stroke not too

long ago, and he has to walk in
the middle of the road because

people walk their dogs a lot in
our neighborhood, and so you

can't walk in the grass because
you don't, you can't see what's

in the grass. Those
are some of the things, dealing

with homelessness. I did
interview some people about

homelessness and everybody

that's on the street doesn't

choose to be in there.

Rent is going up again because

we're in popular demand, and

real, we see that land and

houses and everything are on

the upswing. So, it's hard for

people to buy a home.

A lot of people don't have

good credit. So, I'm glad that

we're talking about affordable

housing here in the City and

different things, so that we can

address some of those needs.

The City, it's beautiful. The

traffic. A lot of people were

talking about the parking. That

was a main thing.

Parking. So, that's why I was

in favor of the Broudy's
Project because it will provide

a parking lot. I wanted it to
meet all the requirements, the

height and everything, and they
work that all out with the

former Commission and so that
project is moving forward.

Also, it will revive the west
part of the City. MELISSA: That's what I

was going to say. Yes. It's
really going to be an anchor. CYNTHIA: It's

going to be a gateway for those
shops down there that are

barely surviving. Because when
people park there, they can go

West, not just East, and that
might eliminate some of the

traffic. MELISSA: Well, and I'll

throw in a shout out for West

Augustine, that section of West

King Street. There are

businesses over there. They do

a West King Wednesday. So they

do their own little market

night, if you will. If

those of you aren't familiar

with it, Google it. I don't

know it right off the top of my

head. But they do have a

West King Wednesday. There are

some great businesses over

there. There's food, there's

drink, there's shops.

And so I think I agree with

you. We will see a change in

the ship. CYNTHIA: We will see a change

and people can walk down there.

There's some galleries. There's
a lot of different things going

on that could be promoted more,
once that part livens up. MELISSA: It's

funny that you say something as

simple as a sidewalk and a

street light sort of inspired

you. I know

there's more to it, but... CYNTHIA: Well, I
ran 20 years ago. I ran 20

years ago because children, I
was watching children walk to

the bus stop in the street, and
then they were standing on

Master's Drive, and there was no
sidewalk. And you know how fast

those cars go. And so based on
me running, they put a piece of

sidewalk at the bus stop.

So that they, wherever.. MELISSA: Like a little platform.

If you will, like a spot.

This is where you stand. CYNTHIA: So, we

have to learn to raise our
voices when we see things that

should be better. MELISSA: Right. If you
are just now tuning in, you're

listening to The Break Room.

I'm Melissa Wissel,

Communications Director for the
City of St Augustine. This

week, it is my pleasure to have
Commissioner Cynthia Garris

with us. She is a former City
employee. She knows the ins and

out of City Government. You
and I were talking on our way

over here. Share with us a
little bit, not too much, of what

you saw working for the City,

now that you're kind of on the

other side. You also saw, I'm
going to give a little plug for

the City. We work hard. CYNTHIA: Yes, we
do work hard. People don't realize the volume of

work we do until they need
something. For example, working

with facilities, management,
working with operations and

property services, which is a
small group group of men that

basically take care of all our
City properties. They make

sure they're up and
operational. They also are the

same individuals, when we have
hurricanes that go down to

Francis Field and help people
sandbag and do things that are

essential to the livelihood.

They go to the City properties

and sandbag and board up
windows. Those are the things

that people don't see. They
don't know whose responsible for

those things. Besides the Fire
and the Police being the first,

they are also on that lineup.

MELISSA: Right and when you talk about

facilities, I didn't realize
this 'til I came to work for

this City as well. If, help
me think through, you're

talking, we're not just talking
about rights of ways and parks

and the Plaza and Francis
Field. We're talking buildings

that we manage, like the Casa on
St George Street. You got

the Galimore Center. Can you
think of any others? I I'm

running out of.. CYNTHIA: And the also the
whole compound. We take

care of those properties, as
well. So, the compound is

located on West King St and
there's multiple buildings

there. We also take care of the
Water Treatment Plant. We also

take care of the Wastewater
Treatment Plant. The

Galimore, there's also, we have
to go out to the wellfields. I

used to go out to the wellfields
and do the fire extinguishers.

We also take care of the
Marina. We take care of

the Customer Service / Financial

building on Bridge Street, so

there's multiple buildings.

It's not just City Hall. MELISSA: Not just

City Hall and sweeping the floors.. CYNTHIA: And we fix all the air

conditioners. We fix, we make sure the generators are kept

up. So if we lose power that we can still function as a City.

We have to do elevator inspections for people's

safety. There's a whole lot to facilities that people. MELISSA: Water

fountains. CYNTHIA: Water fountains that people have no idea. Even

the fountains in the plaza, the drinking fountains. We do

all of that. MELISSA: Yeah. And now you're sitting as a

Commissioner. And I know I I've
said congratulations. It's

quite something. How.. are you
seeing things yet? It's a

little early on right now. How
how are things going for you?

CYNTHIA: Well, it's really, because I had
worked with some of the

Commissioners prior, as being an
employee. It's kind of

interesting. I was told by an
employee, they, it's kind of

weird that I was employee, was
like hey Cynthia, and now it's

like hey Commissioner Garris,
the transition is difficult for

some people. And but yet,
it's great because there's so

many people that are excited
for the newness, for the

representation. That's why I
was approached because it's

like, we need representation. We
need somebody that looks like

us on the Commission. And I
think I bring a little bit of

color. And so, it was great
being able to be the voice of

so many people that have
concerns. My email has been

blowing up. I've been asked
every five minutes to speak

somewhere. I'm going to have to
control that, because I'm not

going to get any sleep if I
don't. I went to five events on

Martin Luther King Day. MELISSA: Wow.
Yeah. CYNTHIA: So I felt like I needed

rollerblades by the end of the

day. MELISSA: We'll get you some for

Christmas. Well, we are, we're
certainly excited to have you.

I know there's going to be a
lot of things coming before the

Commission, so we're not
going to talk about anything

that's that's a decision making
matter. I do know your

passion for the City. CYNTHIA: Oh yes.

MELISSA: Your wanting to represent us is a
fresh, is a breath of fresh voice. And I think we've got a

great Commission. CYNTHIA: Yes, I do. I
totally agree. I think we got a

nice group of Commissioners
that will keep the City going

in the right direction. MELISSA:
Absolutely. Well, I'm going to

stop us here so that we don't
overrun. We had a great

conversation. I would love to
have you come back. CYTHIA: Thank you.

MELISSA: There'll be always things for
us to talk about, and we look

forward to seeing you on the
Commission for the next four

years. CYNTHIA: Thank you so much for
this opportunity. MELISSA: If you missed

part of this broadcast and
want to go back and listen from

the beginning, you can now find
us on your favorite podcasting

app. Look for us on Spotify,
Apple Podcast, Spreaker, and

more, you can find that
complete listing of podcast

platforms on CityStAugRadio.com. Visit that website

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in and around the City, and most

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hear from the people doing the

work and making it happen every
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Instagram @CityStAug.

Thanks again for tuning in.

Until next time. ANNOUNCER: You've been
listening to The Break Room, a

weekly program addressing
projects and programs offered

by the City of St Augustine.

Join us each week as the City's

Communications Director,
Melissa Wissel, has in-depth

conversations with the people
who make our town work to meet

the needs of our community. The

Break Room is produced by

Communication Specialist for

the City of St Augustine,

Cindy Walker. See you at this

time next week for another

edition of The Break Room.