

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 everyday. 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.

Thanks for tuning in. I'm

Melissa Wissel, Communications

Director for the City of St

Augustine. It's a very special

conversation this week as I

have invited City Manager John

Regan to join me for a

farewell interview. This is

John's last radio appearance on

The Break Room as he retires

from the City, having served 25

years in total. The last 13 as

City Manager. John, welcome back

to The Break Room. JOHN: Melissa, as

always, it's a pleasure. MELISSA: So

we started a series when Paul

Williamson retired called and

we called it a fare-welcome. So we

farewell the outgoing staff.

Welcome the new person stepping

into that role. We're going to

make this a two part fare-welcome. I want to give you all

of our time today and we're

going to have David come back

and welcome him separately. So,
let's get started. JOHN: Sounds good

to me. MELISSA: Let's start at the
beginning. First job, projects,

what was going on? Lots of
changes in the time you've been

here. JOHN: Sure. So, we came over,
Felicia and our two children,

young children. We came to
St Augustine in May of 1998.

And I was the utilities
director. And in the early

period, we had to really focus on
rebuilding pipelines and

improving the capacity of the
water system and reliability of

the wastewater system. We did a
lot of very ambitious projects

with a very small staff. We actually grew the utility

customer base by 25% in one year. It's hard to believe that

looking back. But that was the period where we drilled

pipelines under the river. We have some of the longest

underwater directional drills that are well below the sea bed

that we built during the period of roughly around 2000.

MELISSA: Okay. That's a very different approach. But we're

still working on wastewater treatment and things like that.

So, some things don't change over the years. JOHN: Well exactly.

So I mean, Cities are always building and rebuilding. It's a

never ending process. And you
know, you're just a steward for

the period of time that you're
here and in charge. And then you

step off and turn it over to
the next steward. MELISSA: Now you are

also involved with. One of the
things you talk about, big

projects was the parking
garage. JOHN: Well, so you know, when

I came over as Utilities
Director, it was traditional

water wastewater and well
fields and that type of work.

So, call that Environmental
Civil Engineering, which I'm a

professional engineer in below
ground work. And we had a

hurricane and it toppled, and a

tropical storm, and they toppled

part of the historic seawall
over. And I had a background

from my prior employment in
FEMA hazard mitigation grants.

And I went to the city manager
and said look, I think we can

qualify for a hazard mitigation
grant, and seawalls are too low,

the earliest sea level rise
principles. And I said, if you

want, I'll go ahead and apply
for a hazard mitigation grant.

And so it was a very
controversial project. It's the

seawall that is south of the
Santa Maria down to the

National Guard Armory. And that
was really where my background

in consensus building, of
bringing together coalitions. I

did a lot of that type of work
in Gainesville. Applied to an

above-ground project that
considered aesthetics and

mobility and sea level rise and
historic preservation. Those

are all the main goals. And that
project kind of set a tone of

how to approach the
infrastructure that is

difficult, conflicting issues,
controversial. And so in 2003, the City
Manager Bill Harris promoted me

to Chief Operations Officer. And
the first item of business was

to solve parking and traffic,
right? MELISSA: You're still trying to

solve that. JOHN: Right. That's never

solved. I found them trying to

solve it back in the 1870s by

the way. MELISSA: Yes. Yeah. JOHN: And the

outcome of that, with a very

splintered community over the

right solutions, resulted in the

parking garage paying for

parking on the street signage,

some shuttling, a number of

things that were transformative

for the community. And the

Garage. There are many skeptics

in the day, but I think it

definitely has proved its worth.

And again, that was an

above-ground project, a lot of

urban design theory, landscape

architecture theory, that is

embedded in the garage. It's

really, if you ever really, if
anyone ever wants to really

nerd out, ask ask me to give
you a tour. MELISSA: Well, and it, the

concept of the parking garage
of course, was we continued and,

like you said, deal with
parking and mobility. But it was

really a starting place. Now,
we can look back to the success

of that and apply how that was
a good thing, to continue

parking garages, other
initiatives that you won't have

to be worrying about. JOHN: Oh,
right. I mean, the parking

garage. I'd, back, prior to the
garage, Monday mornings in City

hall would be filled with calls
complaining of tourist parking

in yards and on street and
clogging the roadways.

Monday morning usually began
with about 15 phone calls of

calling residents complaining
about the parking situation. We

don't have those complaints
today. MELISSA: Right. And that, the

parking garage capacity is
about 1, 200. JOHN: Correct. MELISSA: Right

and it's a great asset for us
to use during hurricanes.

JOHN: Alright. It's
multi-functional. People can

elevate their vehicles and get
on high ground for during

storms. But there have been many, many,
many projects in the past 25

years, ranging from a new water

plant to wastewater plant

upgrades to all types of
pipeline upgrades. Lots of

different things have happened.

The downtown street

improvements. Really focused on
continuing to maintain St

Augustine as an aesthetic,
interesting, unique City. MELISSA: Great.

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, I have the honor of

sharing the studio with John
Regan. He is our retiring City

Manager. Let's shift gears here
for the second part of our

conversation today, John. City
Manager, lots of projects.

Let's go through some of those
projects you're most proud of

as City Manager. I know we just
talked about a couple. Anything

in particular, or maybe even
some things you look back on.

Most difficult times or
difficult parts of the job.

JOHN: Well, I've been the City
Manager through some pretty

interesting periods, starting
with the recession and then on

to the 450th, moving on to
multiple hurricanes, the

Covid pandemic, the Confederate
Monument debate, and so forth.

And then more hurricanes, of
course, and climate change. But I

think if there's something I'm
most proud of, is I've always

taken a multi-generational view
to the City. If you think of

the great cathedrals of Europe,
you know, they're built over

100 years. And we're not really
that different in it, maybe in

decades. So it took two decades,
but a goal that we started, I

started with the Fire Chief
back in 2000. Jimmy Owens was...

that we need to improve the ISO
rating of the Fire Department.

And every Chief, we worked on
one facet that led to that goal,

ranging from water supply to
radio communications to

equipment to morale to

procedures. Ultimately

culminating with Chief Aviles,
when we attained the ISO-1

fire rating. And this is very
important because it is the way

that we make sure our staff can
save people, save structures,

and go home as safe as we can
possibly make it through

training and equipment and
being basically at the top of

the industry. And it also is how
we save lives and structures,

because you could have a fire
run through the historic

area pretty easily. Many of the
buildings still don't have fire

rated walls, things like that.

Also becoming an accredited

Police Department. We started
that with Chief Leuders. And

Chief Fox really took it to
heart and to the next level and

drove it with passion with his
staff and we became an

accredited police department.

And I know that during, after

the George Floyd murder, there
was remarks by former President

Obama that said every City
Manager / Mayor should be looking

at their police department and
looking for the these seven

fundamental principles that
define a correct police

department, a modern police
department. And we had actually

done all seven. And so during
the during the period of George

Floyd and Confederate Monument
debate. We had a police

department and leadership that
was prepared for that event.

We, most people don't realize
it, but we had forty-one

protests. Yeah. During that
period ranging in size and

danger and complexity and we
got through that period. So,
I'm very proud mostly, not, it's
not about the brick and mortar.

It's about the real
institutional change of

cultural change of a drive
towards excellence. MELISSA: Most

rewarding part of the job for
you? JOHN: Well, the the most

rewarding part of the job is I
really enjoy helping people and

I enjoy people reaching their goals and succeeding, whether

it's someone that shows up that has a business idea, or looking

for an idea, or an employee that has a difficult problem, and we

can take that example to build better policy that benefits our

Cities. I'm very proud of something that we did helping

an employee that culminated in helping employees get, buy their

first-time home. And policies allow employees to cash out

part of their sick and vacation balances which are their

equity to help with their down payment. So, I think

that when I look back, I look

at the personal experiences

that I had with people, and
those are the things that I

find most rewarding. MELISSA: And
anything in particular that

you'll miss most? JOHN: Well, I think
I'm going to miss being part of

a team that comes together. And
the City is a can-do

organization, and it's unique in
that way. Not all cities are

this way. I've worked for other
cities. I've worked for

Gainesville. And we have a
different type of attitude. We

operate with a belief that we
can do anything. That we can

fix anything. That we can build
anything. We shoot for the

stars. We punch above our
weight. And we do noble

work. We save people's lives.
We deliver water, wastewater to

the toughest standards in the
world. And we're constantly

evolving the City to maintain a
vibrant economy. And I miss

being so intimately involved in
that, but I'll be involved in my

own way as a resident. MELISSA: You'll
come back. You're going to take

a break though. JOHN: Oh, yeah. My
wife and I are going to take a

wonderful break.

We're going to travel for about

three months and then we'll
come back and see what drives

our passion. ,MELISSA: I love to hear
that. And one last question for

you. Any one singular piece of
advice for David Birchim as he

comes and fills your shoes? Or
takes on the of being at the

helm of our City? JOHN: Can I give
two pieces of advice?

MELISSA: Absolutely. JOHN: When there's five
plates spinning and

everything's coming at you one
time, just slow down. It's okay

not to make a decision. Just
slow down. The second thing is

that when the with the
difficult decisions and there's

only going to be negative
consequences no matter what you

decide. Just remember who you
are as a person, what your

values are, what you believe

about yourself, and make those

decisions that support that, how
you see yourself. MELISSA: Great advice.

I will tell you I will miss
you. I'm looking forward to

working for David. You've
been a great inspiration to me.

I think your compassion for
people, and I agree with you. We

are a, we are a yes organization.

And I think some of that comes

from you because you don't like
to say no. And what I take from

that though is finding ways to
help find a way to say yes.

Finding ways to say yes. So,
before I get too choked up.

I'm going to say thank you for
your service and thank you for

coming and sharing this time

with me on The Break Room. JOHN: And

thank you for all you do
because you're doing a lot.

MELISSA: Thank you. Thank you. If you
missed part of this broadcast,

and want to go back and listen
from the beginning. You can

find us on your favorite
podcasting app. Look for us on

Spotify, Apple Podcast
Spreaker, and more. You can

find that complete listing of
podcasting platforms on the

website at CityStAugRadio.com. We want to keep you

informed about what's happening
in and around the City and most

that you hear it here from the
people doing the work and

making it happen everyday.

Follow us on all of our social

platforms. You'll find us on

Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram @CityStAug.

Until next time, thanks for

tuning in. 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.