

The Break Room: Reuben Franklin, Assistant City Manager, August 20, 2024

Narrator:

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 Wissel:

Welcome to the break Room. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the city of St. Augustine. It's about that time again to get an update on some of the major projects of what's happening in and around the city. So I've invited Reuben Franklin, he's our assistant city manager, back. We've got construction, resiliency, mobility, parking, all kinds of good stuff. Reuben, welcome back.

Reuben Franklin:

Well, thanks for having me. It's good to be back.

Melissa Wissel:

We've gotten really good at this because if you could see my notepad, my notepiece of paper, there's not a whole lot written on it. So we're going to just wing it.

Reuben Franklin:

Sounds good to me.

Melissa Wissel:

Let's start, I want to start with the conservation program that we recently implemented, kind of in this fiscal year.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

And give us a little bit of the history of it, where it came about. And then we've got some exciting news of a recent award.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes, exactly. So love talking about our conservation program. It's brand new. The commission, our city commission approved the program. And so it's the first of its kind for the city. And we had our first applicants come and we did a staff ranking of them. And so we have our first properties for consideration for the conservation program. Very happy to move forward with that. And we also, right before the conservation program was adopted, we had purchased a property on Florida Avenue. And so staff went and we submitted a grant with the state. It's called an FCT grant. And we are getting money back. So we purchased the property. And then you're allowed to submit for these conservation grants we are just approved to get the grant back, and it's going to be \$967,500.

Melissa Wissel:

So close to a million dollars.

Reuben Franklin:

We're getting half of the money back that we purchased, and then we're going to use that money to purchase more conservation land.

Melissa Wissel:

Kind of a pay it forward.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah. And so as long as the state keeps this program going, we're going to continue to submit to get money back from purchases that we're making because it's all on the same goal of conservation. And we'll see how far we can go with that.

Melissa Wissel:

So I wanted what you just said, that the whole goal of the conservation program was there's properties around the city that people were approaching the city saying, you need to buy this, we need to intervene. How can the city intervene to protect and to conserve? So can we talk just a little bit about where it came from and why? And you mentioned the Florida Avenue project. sort of the start, but that one wasn't in this particular program to speak of.

Reuben Franklin:

Typically, residents of the public wake up when a development is about to occur, and then we start to get a lot of public comments and people mobilize to say, hey, we don't really want this. So that was kind of the how Florida Avenue came about. The neighborhood mobilized and they got the attention of our commission, and the commission asked us to look into it. We did. But it was also the developer, too. The developer and the landowner realized that they would consider selling it to the city at appraised value, and so they did that. So it takes everybody. And so the conservation program in that spirit, is we have to have willing sellers, but we have an application period that opens. If you go on our website, you can get to the conservation program website and it has the application. But if there's anybody out there that has a piece of property in the city limits that you're interested in, you could go fill out this form.

Melissa Wissel:

And it has to meet criteria.

Reuben Franklin:

And it has to meet criteria.

Melissa Wissel:

You can't just be like, I think I want to sell my house, my property to this area.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah, we're typically looking for conservation, so undeveloped properties that can be added to our green space and our open space of the city of St. Augustine, which is very important. But, yeah, if you want to go check out our conservation program, you can see the two properties that have been ranked and submitted. One's also on Florida Avenue and the other ones in the Oyster Creek area. And we've got a couple more applications that have come in.

Melissa Wissel:

is there a period like an application period and then an approval? Because we try to. We're trying to. The whole spirit of it as well is to time it in the budget process so it doesn't become this, oh, my gosh, we need to find money to fund this.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah, that's correct. So that's why we were just in front of the commission to the two properties that we had ranked. We wanted to get the commission's feedback on. And the idea is going into the budget process, but we also don't want to. If a really good property comes in, we don't want to wait either. So it's kind of a dynamic, flexible thing. We're kind of working through it. It's brand new.

Melissa Wissel:

First year.

Reuben Franklin:

First year. So we're working through all of those details.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we're glad I know from, I think from the community standpoint, the community's feedback of the city's response is that we're reacting and we're responding and we're adapting and we're doing things to save and conserve. And that's always a good thing.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes. Yes, it is.

Melissa Wissel:

So going from conservation, saving things. Let's talk a little bit about, you mentioned development. So one of the things that continually comes up, of course, is King street and the San Sebastian Bridge project one is still moving forward. One got stalled by a year. Can you give our residents a little bit of an update on what they can expect?

Reuben Franklin:

Oh, yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

On those two projects.

Reuben Franklin:

So the bridge replacement on King street was supposed to be under construction by now, and it was going to be closed for twelve months. Permits, delays. The state has postponed the project. We're anticipating that it's going to come back next summer. So it will be under construction. It's going to get rebuilt. We just had delays in permits. The city itself, we have our potable water main. If you ever go across the bridge and you look to the north, that pipe that you see out there is feeding potable water for all the downtown area in the island. So we have to actually do a directional drill and put that pipe under the riverbed. And we're working on getting our permits in line. And there was a couple of other entities, FPL, FL,

Florida power and Light's gonna underground our electric. So we're working through the permitting there.

Melissa Wissel:

So it's a big undertaking, and we're gonna see some redirection of some of the streets in that area with the traffic design.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah. So when the bridge closes for construction, there's just no way that they can build it without closing the bridge. Traffic's going to go down Malaga street, and we're going to put , DoT is going to put a traffic signal at Malaga and us one. So that's going to give green time to people trying to get specifically southbound on US 1. If you're turning left off of Malaga street.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. And big important reminder there, DoT. These are constraints that we have, you know, or things that we need to work on with DoT. And once it's all finished, then it will become ours, so to speak.

Reuben Franklin:

That's correct.

Melissa Wissel:

And let's talk about the other end of King street down at the bridge alliance. How are we doing on that one?

Reuben Franklin:

So DoT, the intersection improvements were just recently reaffirmed by our city commission. So DoT is moving forward with the intersection improvements at the base of

the bridge, very similar to May street, but it is going to significantly reduce the traffic backups that occur, the queues that build when the bridge of lions goes up and during our peak times.

Melissa Wissel:

When are we going to see that?

Reuben Franklin:

They're estimating 2026 start time, so they're in the design, going through the design phase now. So that's going forward. And then what the city has on its plate to finish is the redesign of Cathedral and King street in between the base of the Bridge of Lions and the bridge on. So we're working through that. I plan to be in front of the city commission very soon to show them the concepts and get approval. We've gone through a lot of public engagement. We've had two publicly advertised workshops. We have a website, if anybody's interested, to check out the King street website that shows the concepts. But right now, what we're looking at is one laning cathedral and then adding a lot more pedestrian crossings in between Cordova and Malaga street. So in between your intersections, which will be raised intersections for easier pedestrian crossing, we're looking at adding these mid block crossings, new lighting, landscaping, bricking. It's a great project. Very excited. We're really going to match our, the beauty of our entry corridors. It's one of our entry corridors, and so we're going to redesign this road to really match the architecture that's already there from the buildings along the corridor.

Melissa Wissel:

And one thing you just mentioned, we've had public meetings. We've taken public input. You've heard it here multiple times. But soon we will be able to see what those designs look like. It'll be on the website and we're moving forward.

Reuben Franklin:

It's already on the website. If you're curious. Go check out the project website.

Melissa Wissel:

There's a link on the homepage under popular resources. You've got a listing of a bunch of things. And the King street is there.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes. And so I would encourage everybody to look at it because it's a big project and it's going to change the look of downtown in a good way.

Melissa Wissel:

But it's not going to happen next year. It's going to happen 2026.

Reuben Franklin:

This construction's slated for 2028.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. So we've got time.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes. Well, we have a lot going on. So the bridge replacement has to get done, the intersection improvements, and then this project, which is, this is actually a city controlled project. So we're going to take our time, be methodical. Access and traffic pattern disruptions are very important to us. So before it happens, you're going to know well in advance.

Melissa Wissel:

Well in advance. Well, if you're just now tuning into the break room, I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director, and I have assistant city manager Reuben Franklin. We're talking about some of the great construction projects, things that we have going on. Two other things that I have on my list here for us to chat about. Tell us. You and I have met a couple of

times, but folks should start seeing some information coming out about what we're calling Smart St. Augustine. Tell me about Smart St. Augustine.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes. Smart St. Augustine is a transportation led project. It's a raise grant, federal raise grant. We're working with our partners, FDOT. It's a \$15 million grant, and it's all centered around getting real time parking with dynamic message signs. So as you're coming into the city, we're actually showing you where there's available parking. When we have events, when we're running our shuttles on the periphery, and on top of that, flood sensors for when roads flood emergency services so they can correspond with the traffic signals. It's website and app everything. So we're really looking to put them at the best information for our travelers in their hands so they can see where there's parking available and how to get there.

Melissa Wissel:

I don't know that we've done a whole lot of talking about it, but we currently have a mobile app that we've run through Modii, and the shortcut for it on the website is citystaug.com/parkingspotfinder. So we've actually started it.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah, so we have the platforms there. So now we're going to start plugging in all these different devices to it. The circulator is going to become a real time, so you're going to be able to actually see where the circulator is at in its route. We'll be developing these mobility hubs with kiosks, so the kiosk will actually have the real time information. And like I said, at the end of the day, it's really trying to get all this information into the end user's hands. Pedestrian crosswalks are part of that as well, upgrading those. And it's a great project. We're real excited and we're going to be having be on the lookout because our first public meeting for that's going to be on the near horizon.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. We talk about these kind of things, and it often seems like it's so far down the road, but they take a while.

Reuben Franklin:

They do.

Melissa Wissel:

It takes a while to get it implemented. I know. Even in, when you bring up the star circulator, I keep thinking about, oh, and then we're going to have that, that bus stop over at the Browdie lot. That's a whole another project.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

You know, but that's going to take some time. But we're getting. We're making progress on that as well.

Reuben Franklin:

That's correct. Yeah. So the Browdie garage right there on the corner of King street and US 1, West King street and US 1 is underway. We're in the design process with the property owner, Barry Browdy, and his development team. And so we're anticipating two years to have that garage open for business, and we'll be running a circulator out of that to connect into the downtown and to the west city area. So it's all good stuff, but, yeah, just like you said, things take time. One of my favorite things that's just happened is the crosswalk on Anastasia Boulevard is finally, it's been constructed and it's active

Melissa Wissel:

And it's working. You can see that light from me. Hands upstairs, downtown. I'm telling you what, that red light, I saw that a couple weeks ago, and I saw that red light. I'm like, what in the world is that? It looks like a. It looks like a train light.

Reuben Franklin:

But that's taken about eight years. Eight years from. Okay. It qualifies for a crossing to getting the funding in place, to getting it designed and installed. So I'm very happy because that was something whenever I go to, especially in Davis Shores, they've been asking for these crosswalks for a long time. So now that we've got one up and it's running, anybody that's out for a walk, go, go use it.

Melissa Wissel:

Please go use it. Yeah. My son could have used that when he was going back and forth to CPS. Okay, one last shout out. Kudos to you guys. The one way on Spanish Street, I know some folks may or may not know about it, but I do want to make sure that we just kind of tip our hats to that pilot process. The residents are very happy the commission agreed, and that is now permanently in place.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes. So the city commission affirmed to keep the pilot project where we had a local pedestrian access only section of Spanish street between Kuna and Orange, and a pedestrian only section between toloomatal Lane and Orange. They voted to make that permanent, so we're going to go through the process of making it permanent. But if anybody's out for a walk in downtown, come check out the newest section of Spanish street. It's the newly bricked lighted.

Melissa Wissel:

It's beautiful. It's beautiful.

Reuben Franklin:

If you're out for a walk, please go check it out if you haven't done it.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, Reuben, as always, thanks for coming and giving us this update. We are out of time and we'll catch you next time.

Reuben Franklin:

I'll see you next time.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. We want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city and that you hear it from the people here doing it every day, making it happen. Follow us on social media. You'll see us on Facebook, Instagram and X @citystaug. Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

Narrator:

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. See you at this time next week for another edition of the Break room.