

The Break Room: Vicky Oakes, St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections, October 22, 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. Thanks for joining us. With federal, state and local elections, here it is starting this week in St. Johns county. So I've invited back our supervisor of elections, Vicky Oakes, to give us those great and important reminders about getting out the vote. Welcome back.

Vicky Oakes:

Thank you, Melissa. Great to be here.

Melissa Wissel:

It's, we are, well, we say this every year that there's an election. It's an election year. It's a big year, but it's really a big year.

Vicky Oakes:

It is a big year. It is a presidential election year. There are a number of constitutional amendments on our ballot, a couple of them very important, that could change the face of Florida. We have two local school board referenda and then there's lots of candidates on the ballot, too. Ballots are long. There are two pages per voter, front and back. So my main message to our voters is you have to get ready. You have to make a plan. You need to look at and study your sample ballot and prepare to voting. It's long. It's going to take you time.

Melissa Wissel:

This is not one of those types. This is not one of those days where you just walk in to take the test and hope you can remember from class.

Vicky Oakes:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

You need to do some homework.

Vicky Oakes:

You do.

Melissa Wissel:

Can you give me, us, our listeners, a quick snapshot of those two school referenda. It's where the money's going.

Vicky Oakes:

Okay. So the last two items on the ballot, one is a half cent sales tax, which is basically, Melissa, a renewal of the sales tax half cent. It's been in existence and was passed by the voters ten years ago. It was only for a period of ten years. So this is renewing that. basically a renewal. The second item has to do with teacher pay that is an additional mill assessment on your taxes. You have to go to the school board's website to find out more information on that.

Melissa Wissel:

But that's to help pay salaries.

Vicky Oakes:

for teacher salaries.

Melissa Wissel:

Teacher salaries. So very important and very important to look up. We also talked about judges. If I don't do my homework, man. I don't even know what my rhyme or reason is. If I'm looking at a name, if I haven't looked them up to see what it is, I don't know if it's cause I like the sound of their name or if it's cause I saw more signs. But if you don't do your homework on who these judges are, you really have no idea.

Vicky Oakes:

Yes. Two of them are supreme court justices. That's the Supreme Court of Florida. And then there are seven appellate judges for the fifth district court of Appeal. So let me give you a hint. flcourts.org. And I'll repeat that, flcourts.org. It is one location. You can go and do your research on all nine of these judges from one location.

Melissa Wissel:

Nine judges. That's a lot of people. I think sometimes, you know, we generally locally, you know, the names of folks. But I think with something like judges, you really need to go look into that. You also mentioned we have things that'll change the state. What were those two? We want folks to do their research, their homework.

Vicky Oakes:

So there's six constitutional amendments. Number one has to do with school board members are currently elected as nonpartisan candidates. The question is, do you want to change those races to partisan races? Number three has to do with recreational marijuana, and number four is the abortion.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay, so again, message this week is do your homework.

Vicky Oakes:

Do your homework and make your voting plan.

Melissa Wissel:

Let's talk about the plan. So when you and I are coming over here, I said, make a plan. I'm thinking, what's your plan? You just go and you vote. But you brought up a very good point. It's a big election. It may not be such a quick stop. Run in and cast your ballot. Again with doing homework. Don't try to do your homework standing there, but give me the why do we need a plan?

Vicky Oakes:

Okay, you need a plan because anticipated turnout for this election is 85%, and due to the length of the ballot being two page per vote or both sides, and it taking a while for voters, there's going to be lines not only at the polls on election day, but at our early voting sites as well.

Melissa Wissel:

Let's come back to the early voting. I do want to mention the polling sites. A plan. Well, let's talk about the early voting. When you say make a plan, you can vote anywhere in the county. If you're a registered St. Johns county voter, any of those locations, you don't have to go just to your precinct location. That's the benefit of early voting. one of them.

Vicky Oakes:

And let me clarify. From October 21 to November 2, there will be nine early voting locations open.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay.

Vicky Oakes:

Those are the only places you can go cast a ballot. One of the nine locations, they're available on our website, votesjc.gov. Those nine locations are gonna be open for 13 days, which include two Saturdays, one Sunday from 06:00 a.m. excuse me, 08:00 a.m. to 06:00 p.m. daily.

Melissa Wissel:

We have more than those nine locations on election day.

Vicky Oakes:

On election day, we open 43 polling places around the county. But you cannot vote there during early voting. Only on election day.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay, so I'm gonna. Just. Because I can. I have it in front of me. Cause you hand me this cheat sheet. You've got Ponte Vedra library up in Ponte Vedra beach. You got Julington Creek annex. You've got river house at Rivertown. In St. Johns, you got the cafe at World Golf hall of Fame, you got your office. Supervisor of elections office, Solomon Calhoun Center, St. Augustine Beach City hall, the southeast branch of the library, which is down on south US1, and also the W E Harris Community center in Hastings. So again, votesjc.gov to get those locations. Early voting is happening. Now. I want to just tell folks, if you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. And we have Vicky Oakes with us this week. She is our supervisor of elections. Always full of great information. Early voting really gets. Gets that out of the way. Let's talk a little bit about,

Vicky Oakes:

43 polling places. Polling places that we open on election day.

Melissa Wissel:

on November 5. Let's talk a little bit. Let's remind folks, we're not mailing anything now at this time.

Vicky Oakes:

Right, at this time, voters have already received their sample ballots. Voters, if they have requested them, have already been mailed their vote by mail ballots. Very important. If you still have them, you have to get them back to us by election day at 07:00 p.m. so don't wait. Voters, that's part of your plan. If you are voting by mail, be responsible. If you're returning your ballot by mail to stamps, you have the option also to drop them off. We have secure ballot intake stations at all nine of our locations. Voters can drop their ballots off there or bring them to the elections office. Don't be late with your ballots.

Melissa Wissel:

Don't be late. I'm gonna ask this question. I don't know if this is no question. The only dumb question is the one not asked. Do we still have the whole post marked by. Is that rule still apply?

Vicky Oakes:

No. And we never have had for vote by mail ballots.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay.

Vicky Oakes:

Vote by mail ballots are required by law to be in the elections office at 07:00 p.m. in order to be counted.

Melissa Wissel:

And I can drop it off in the box in the lobby anytime.

Vicky Oakes:

Anytime the office is open.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. Right.

Vicky Oakes:

And the secure ballot intake station at our early voting sites are available only to voters during the hours of voting. They are inside monitored by a staff member at all times.

Melissa Wissel:

And that maybe that's a good way to kind of wrap up our conversation. You're very good at what you do. And you have, we have very good voter turnout. You mentioned 85% is expected. What was our, do you recall, I'm putting you on the spot. what our best turnout in the county?

Vicky Oakes:

Four years ago for the presidential election, we had an 85% voter turnout. So we've been basing our numbers and our projections all along on that. St. Johns county does not turn out too good in a primary election. The one we just had. Terrible, terrible. Only 25% voter turnout. But I believe people are going to be out and they're going to be voting.

Melissa Wissel:

A lot at stake this year, it seems.

Vicky Oakes:

There is a lot of stake this year.

Melissa Wissel:

But you have training. You have, you take a lot of pride in the integrity of the St. Johns county elections office that you are in charge of. You guys do a great job. Training, supervision.

Vicky Oakes:

Yes. And the legislatures have made a number of law changes the last three years that really have tightened down a lot of our processes. And I have a great team, Melissa, and everybody is. From my 17 full time staff, I hired 35 additional part time help at election time. And for this election, we hired and trained 650 poll workers.

Melissa Wissel:

Wow.

Vicky Oakes:

So everybody, it's all about letting our voters have their say. Because I'm just like you, Melissa, I only get one vote.

Melissa Wissel:

Right?

Vicky Oakes:

And it's not up to me and it's not up to you. It is up to our voters to decide.

Melissa Wissel:

And if I want to get involved, you mentioned hiring. If I'm a volunteer, I'm a poll worker. Is there any kind of a stipend involved or that's strictly volunteer?

Vicky Oakes:

No, we're not allowed to use volunteers. By law. I have to pay them. They have to come to training. All of our training classes have ended, early voting is going on. A lot of our election day poll workers also work our locations during early voting, so they're already working in the field.

Melissa Wissel:

Great. And the training, if I want to sign up, I can get that information also?

Vicky Oakes:

on our website for the next election. Next time.

Melissa Wissel:

Do you ever turn people away or is there a limit? Like, can you only have a certain number of people? Or I guess, is there an abundance of applications?

Vicky Oakes:

Yes, we had a lot of people apply. Very fortunate. We have more than what we need. We do have to put a limit and stop and say, okay, we have enough applications. We have enough people hired. They have to come to training class. They have to do online training. They have to take an in person training class so they can learn about the laws, their responsibility, and what they have to do prior to working in election. The law requires that.

Melissa Wissel:

Great. And we follow the laws around here.

Vicky Oakes:

Yes, ma'am.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I appreciate you coming by. Early voting is happening now. Find your location. If you're maybe you've got a location closer to where you work than to where you live. And so if you go early or go after work, but look at the map. It's all on the website. It's all on,

Vicky Oakes:

votesjc.gov

Melissa Wissel:

And your office is located up there by the courthouse complex.

Vicky Oakes:

US1 North and Avenue A.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. And we're going to see a record turnout. We're going to try to bump that number up higher than 85%.

Vicky Oakes:

So I'd love to that.

Melissa Wissel:

You heard it here, everybody. All of you listeners, get out there and get your vote. Do your homework.

Vicky Oakes:

Make your plan, too late to request a vote by mail ballot. Return your ballot in time to be counted. You have 13 full days of early voting from 08:00 a.m. to 06:00 p.m. daily. That includes two Saturdays and one Sunday. And I say as a last resort, your precinct is always open on election day from 07:00 a.m. to 07:00 p.m.

Melissa Wissel:

And that this year is Tuesday, November 5.

Vicky Oakes:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

Don't miss it.

Vicky Oakes:

Don't miss it.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks again for coming. Good luck.

Vicky Oakes:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

We'll see you next time.

Vicky Oakes:

See you next time.

Melissa Wissel:

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. You can also find us on our website, at citystaugradio.com. We want to hear we want you to hear what's happening in and around the city and in the county, particularly when it's voting time, most importantly also that you hear it from the people who do the work to make it happen. Follow us on our social media platforms. You'll find us on Facebook, Instagram, and X. Our handle is @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.