

The Break Room: Carlos Aviles, Fire Chief, November 26, 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:

Hello and thanks for tuning in. You're listening to The Break Room. This week we are wrapping up the 2024 hurricane season, putting a nice bow on that box and sending it onto the shelf until next year. And with that, I've invited Fire Chief Carlos Aviles to join us. He's going to give us a recap, talk a little bit about Nights of Lights, holiday fire safety. Chief, welcome back.

Carlos Aviles:

Oh, thank you so much. It's great to be back.

Melissa Wissel:

Just a few quick topics to cover.

Carlos Aviles:

Okay.

Melissa Wissel:

Last time you were in The Break Room, it was the beginning of hurricane season. How did we do?

Carlos Aviles:

I mean, it was a very active hurricane season. You know, we weren't unaffected by it this year for sure. We were very fortunate in the grand scheme of things. So we did see some impacts from Helene and also from Milton. So but they all, thankfully the damage was limited.

Melissa Wissel:

Are we getting better as a community? We, I can tell you from a solid waste standpoint, I know that our folks in public work, solid waste, were very pleased with people's response, reaction, getting things out and ready to go. I know we face that question every year because we've got a lot of new residents.

Carlos Aviles:

We do. And it's a challenging topic of conversation as we, you know, we live in an area that's very sought after. So it's very common for us to have a lot of people that have not had that experience. And then tragically, we have a lot of people that have more experience and they wish to or care to recall. So I think that's a part of it. I think the community did a wonderful job this year. Milton, the level of participation, when we look back on that one from an evacuation perspective and, you know, folks just adhering to those messages, I think that happens a lot because it was such a big storm. Right. You know, when you hear CAT3, 4, 5, it really heightens people's awareness and they really start to pay attention. So. But no, I mean, as a whole responded really well this year.

Melissa Wissel:

And when it, and when you come off of a former storm like Helene, where we, we dodged it and it, and it goes somewhere else and you go, ooh, guess we need to pay attention.

Carlos Aviles:

We do. You know, and it's interesting because, like, the day after Helene passed, we ended up, you know, the state. We all participate in this state emergency response plan. And so

there were mission requests coming in, dozens of them, to send resources to different parts of the state. So we took a team from here in St. Augustine, and I actually went over with them and headed up a task force that went to Dixie County. So we worked a lot in the Horseshoe Beach, Suwanee and Gina near Steenhatchie area. But we were trying to cover 700 square miles of very rural area with five trucks and one renegade task force commander. But it was a great experience. I mean, the level of devastation was incredible and just heartbreaking. But in my role here as fire chief and then also serving as the emergency management coordinator, it gave me a really unique perspective to see a recent disaster. And then every community that we would go in and assist, I'm constantly looking and assessing and going, okay, if I had this back home, but what. What would we do? What lessons can we learn from this? What. What kind of things do we need to take into account? We've not seen this level of. Of devastation.

Melissa Wissel:

I think that's the thing I always circle back to with folks, is the people. I think I counted. We've had nine, I believe, since you and I started the first one. Right. We love to talk about that, but I think we've had nine. And what we. I think what we forget sometimes is we haven't had that direct hit.

Carlos Aviles:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

So we've had devastation of our own, and we've had that. Like you say, some people don't like to think about it, and I don't like to dwell on it, but I do like to remind people we haven't had a direct hit like what we've seen other places. We have to be mindful

Carlos Aviles:

and just understanding that the impacts extend so far outside of that cone and that track. So when we look at, you know, Helene hit that Big Bend area of Florida where we were working, but you go hundreds of miles south into, you know, the St. Pete, Tampa area, and even further south than that, and they were decimated. Unbelievable amounts of storm

surge. And their recovery was still ongoing when Milton came. You know, I have a friend of mine that's the fire chief for Treasure island in the St. Pete area. They couldn't respond to help people because there were five feet of sand on all of the roads from the surge in Milton.

Carlos Aviles:

And so then, you know, they still had giant piles of debris to clean up when Milton came.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Carlos Aviles:

And that was a lot of what we saw. I mean that big bend area looking like to see the effects of a 10 to 15 foot storm surge up close.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. we've had seven. Seven is our highest.

Carlos Aviles:

Right. No, it was absolutely devastating that of the areas that we toured and they were all really, really bad. But the, the town of Horseshoe Beach, I would tell you, I mean maybe 15% of the structures survived. Yep, yep. And we were finding debris 2 miles inland. There were debris from homes along the coast. That's like incredible.

Melissa Wissel:

Two miles inland from us would be just short of I95.

Carlos Aviles:

No, probably around. It's different because we have the intercoastal here. So it's be kind of difficult to gauge it that way. Just.

Melissa Wissel:

But even thinking of what two miles looks like.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah. Just imagine finding debris from your house, you know, somewhere off of West King street or homes. And that's sort of the equivalent of we were talking about.

Melissa Wissel:

So. Yeah, well, so we're putting, we're closing the chapter on that and moving over to Nights of Lights. Of course we lucked out. We didn't have any of those last minute threats of wind and rain and storm coming in.

Carlos Aviles:

So we have, I remember scrambling to get nights of lights underway. Yeah. So no, we are, we're transitioning from hurricanes to holiday lights. Tis the season.

Melissa Wissel:

Tis the season. And I'm also going to take this opportunity. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm talking with fire chief Carlos Aviles. We've put a nice little bow on the 2024 hurricane season. Looking ahead to the holidays. Everybody's got their lights going. We're ready for Thanksgiving. Let's talk fire safety for the holidays. turkey frying candles, Christmas trees. Space heaters.

Carlos Aviles:

Space heaters. So that's it. Is getting into our busy fire season. Yep. So those are just good reminders for folks know. Make sure that you've got modern space heaters that have built in

safety features in case they tip over. Don't put them near any furniture, curtains or anything else that might be combustible. Make sure those turkeys are thawed and dried before you attempt to fry them.

Melissa Wissel:

Outside.

Carlos Aviles:

Outside.

Melissa Wissel:

Not in your garage.

Carlos Aviles:

That's correct.

Melissa Wissel:

Not under your carport. Open space.

Carlos Aviles:

That's correct. You got it. So you've done this before?

Melissa Wissel:

I have.

Carlos Aviles:

That's it. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. I've, I've, I pay attention.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

I listen to what you tell me. The but. And the other one, of course, Fireplaces.

Carlos Aviles:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

I have to tell you, during a staff call, you said, yeah, we had a fireplace fire.

Carlos Aviles:

Chimney fire.

Melissa Wissel:

Chimney fire. And I kind of thought to myself. Isn't that where fires are supposed to happen?

Carlos Aviles:

That's where they. Yes. Until they. Until they don't.

Melissa Wissel:

Until they don't.

Carlos Aviles:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

Until they go up or down and out.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct. Yep. So this one had escaped the fireplace and caught some structural members of a house on fire.

Melissa Wissel:

So just take care of your starting your fireplace.

Carlos Aviles:

We'll get a lot of calls. For folks, you know, if you're turning your heaters on for the first time, there's dust in those duct systems that can hit heating coils and elements. So it's a very common thing for us. I think. I think I smell smoke in my house. It's like. Have you turned your heater on yet this season? No, it's the first time. First time. That's probably what it is. Yep.

Melissa Wissel:

But don't wait for the flame.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah. Don't wait for that. Right. let us know, we'll come out and take a look at it.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. Before we wrap up, I'm going to ask one burning question of you that everybody wants to hear about. How are we feeling about the forward motion of our new property acquisition for the fire station?

Carlos Aviles:

Yes. So the city, the city commission voted to move forward with the purchase of 500 Anastasia Boulevard. This has been, you know, just some quick context for folks. I mean, we've been looking for a place to relocate the island fire station across from the alligator farm since 2012.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Carlos Aviles:

And for one reason. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

That's 12 years.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah. It's a 12 year long endeavor. The current administration really has been pushing very hard to find a resolution and solution to this. And it's a challenge when we start looking at, we got to find a space that meets our needs in terms of available space for us to be able to build on that doesn't negatively impact our service area and response times and gives us the flexibility and so.

Melissa Wissel:

Elbow room for those tracts.

Carlos Aviles:

A little bit of that. So, you know, in a. In a community such as this that's so built out that there's not a ton of available locations to be able to do that. And even if there are, there's no guarantee that they're for sale.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Carlos Aviles:

So.

Melissa Wissel:

And you can't avoid the nimby. We get that.

Carlos Aviles:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

Not in my backyard

Carlos Aviles:

Yep. That's always a challenge. And so we've looked extensively at a lot of things. There was an opportunity that presented itself late in September. The city ran a feasibility study on a piece of property and determined that, hey, this could meet our needs. And so they approached the commission about negotiating. And so we're very excited. There's a lot of opportunities for us when it comes to this fire station. There's, you know, the current station

was built in 1959, so was only ever really designed. Housed two firefighters at a time. Right. There's three there now.

Melissa Wissel:

And smaller trucks and.

Carlos Aviles:

Yes, and much smaller trucks because the trucks only carried two firefighters. And so, you know, modern day fire apparatus. It's a. We're going through a design of a new truck now and I have to be, you know, we sit with engineering firms for our vendor and I'm like, hey, no, you got to take this back. This is too tall. It won't fit in the fire station. And then. So that's challenging with them and the engineers to figure out how structurally do we make these changes, you know, and sometimes it's something as simple as relocating lights or grab handles.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Carlos Aviles:

Just to make sure.

Melissa Wissel:

You've also got to figure the turning radius in our streets.

Carlos Aviles:

Right. So there's just a lot of challenges to navigating in the nation's oldest city. There's also a lot of built in safety features that we hope to incorporate with the station that we don't have. There's a lot that we can do for the firefighters themselves as it relates to safety and health. A lot of cancer prevention initiatives. Cancer is quite the epidemic in the fire

service. And so there's a lot that we're going to be able to incorporate in that as it comes to air ventilation, the ability to clean gear at the station, refill bottles, having separated hot, cold and warm zones as it pertains to contaminants, and really decreasing their long term risk exposure to known carcinogens.

Melissa Wissel:

And all of that's above and beyond. We need a bigger station or gee, that station's really small.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

You know, and I know that there were a lot of. There's a lot of ideas being thrown about the distribution center, meeting rooms. I mean, who knows? All of that is yet to be determined, so.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

It's all on the table.

Carlos Aviles:

Yep. So kind of where we're at now is there's a. There's a request for qualifications out there that we'll look at sometime in December and hope to go under contract with an architectural firm that has experience in building fire stations. We have internally We've set up a task force or committee to really look at this and kind of spearhead this. But that's also going to involve a tremendous amount of public feedback. So it's location on the

boulevard, it requires us to adhere to the design standards for Anastasia Boulevard. And you know, while some may look at that as a bit of a challenge or a hindrance, I think it's a really unique opportunity for us to engage the public and to hold some open houses and forums to solicit their feedback.

Melissa Wissel:

And we love our public meetings.

Carlos Aviles:

We do. And so it's a really great opportunity for the community to be involved in it, for them to see sort of how this project is evolving, to have a say in it. And ultimately we want them to be a part of the process to help, you know, pick out the final design. This will be a staple on the boulevard when it's all said and done.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, and like you just said, there's buy in from those neighbors particularly perhaps because they can, they can then be proud of what it looks like to feel like they had their say.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct. Hopefully that's our hope. That's our goal.

Melissa Wissel:

Excellent. Well, I think we covered a lot of ground.

Carlos Aviles:

We did.

Melissa Wissel:

Thank you for stopping by. Congratulations to a successful, somewhat, shall we call it, hurricane season. And I want to hear about the new fire engine when you're ready to talk about.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah, well, we can talk about that when the time comes. Let's not do that. Let's not do hurricanes next year.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. Yeah, we'll just take that. Yeah. Kelly Wilson likes us to say let's just cancel hurricane.

Carlos Aviles:

We'll cancel it. We'll just cancel it.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay, awesome. Thanks for stopping by, chief.

Carlos Aviles:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

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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.