

The Break Room: Commissioner Jon DePreter, December 17, 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. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the city of St. Augustine. Thanks for tuning in. We're kicking off a five week series of interviews to bid farewell to 2024 and welcome in 2025. Starting this week with our most recently elected new city official, Commissioner Jon DePreter. Commissioner, welcome to your first edition of The Break Room.

Jon DePreter:

Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, first off, congratulations on your election.

Jon DePreter:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

And you are no stranger to serving the City of St. Augustine community. Most recently, you've been on planning and zoning board for about six years. One point, you were also chair. What made you want to run for city commission?

Jon DePreter:

Well, I had started as a neighborhood association president. I did that for three years. So I felt kind of engaged in my community. And then I was asked by a couple people to put my name in for the city commission and I did that. Then I think it was reported twice. And I find it's a good avenue for me to contribute to the city. It's something I feel comfortable and familiar with and I had some experience with.

Melissa Wissel:

Was it like an arm twisting or were you pretty comfortable with taking on that?

Jon DePreter:

The planning board?

Melissa Wissel:

No, the running for commission. Did you really have to know?

Jon DePreter:

I'm not. I'm not really naturally a politician. I think anyone that knows me would say that, other than they'll tell you I like to talk a lot. But no, it wasn't really something that I had actually just four, three or four months before I decided or right before I decided, I would have never thought that I would have done it.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah, Yeah.

Jon DePreter:

I did actually call some other people to see if they would do it and then I just decided to do it. It was a big jump.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Jon DePreter:

Something that was. You get out of your comfort zone in a way that you're probably not used to. But in the end it was worth it. And win or lose, I don't think I would have regretted it.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. So now that you've had your first commission meeting, went very smoothly. They put you right to work. Several motions. You made a couple of motions. Somebody said Would anyone like to make a motion? I'll make that motion. You were great.

Jon DePreter:

I'm familiar with that.

Melissa Wissel:

Anything stand out to you as anything much different than PZB? Like, did it feel different?

Jon DePreter:

Yeah, I think that. Yeah, it feels a lot different. The room's the same. My seat assignment I've had before, so I felt comfortable there. It's five people as opposed to seven. The protocols, slightly different. And I'm going to try to concentrate on that. Like, I know that everybody gets their one time to speak. We did that on the planning board, but maybe the free discussion period is a little different. Although we had some last night. I think this is a much more public position. I think it deals. It's more political. I think the planning board was a more interpretive position in a way, and you're with a group of people that have expertise in

this area. So it's probably a more technical, interpretive position, which I kind of. Which I love.

Melissa Wissel:

On the planning board.

Jon DePreter:

On the planning board. And this is much broader, much more public. And there's more. I don't want to say. I don't say this in any derogatory way, but more ceremonial stuff and more recognize the community for other events outside of planning.

Melissa Wissel:

It was a very. I would say, an emotional first meeting with the recognition that they did for our police and fire departments for saving the gentleman's life over along with the park, National Park Service officers as well. That was very touching.

Jon DePreter:

So, yeah, that was a good example of the difference. But also, I mean that I think it struck everybody in the room, the emotion from the daughter and having our guys there and women there, and that's about as real as it gets.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Jon DePreter:

In terms of what. What people can do to help other people, that's about as real as it gets. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Do you. Have you sensed a change for you personally? Like, do you feel like. Do you wake up, like, when you go places, do people recognize you? Do you pay attention to things differently? Do you. Is there any noticeable change that you feel like, okay, my life is a little different now? Surely your emails are different.

Jon DePreter:

Yeah. Getting different types of emails. Also, part of the running for office is just being visibly more public. So, as you know, I probably was driving around town a lot with my name on my bike and a car and going to speaking events. So that's something that you grow into. I think that everybody has a different comfort level with that kind of public life. But I feel pretty comfortable that I can, when I go home Separate it from my personal life.

Melissa Wissel:

Anything in particular you're looking forward to? I know I'm kind of throwing lobbing these questions at you. I didn't give you a script beforehand. Anything in particular you're looking forward to?

Jon DePreter:

Learning more about city. Working with my fellow commissioners. I understand from the planning board that you get group of people together, it's collegial, but you might disagree on issues, you might agree with issues, and just to kind of keep it on board like that. And I am, I am looking forward to getting to know the community a little bit better and doing. See whatever part I can do.

Melissa Wissel:

It's different. I think you, you, I believe, if I recall, you made the comment or we've spoken about it, and I can say this, and I think even the communication staff, you don't realize how much and how big city operations are. Even being on the planning and zoning board, you probably figure, oh, I, I know what goes on in the city. And even just as it's been so new for you in just these few brief weeks, there's. There's so much to learn.

Jon DePreter:

There is a big, you know, and as I said at the meeting last night, I want to thank our city manager and assistant city manager and our general service director all. They kind of tag team me and took me around. I can tell you from my personal experience, I did go in some offices. Planning and zoning. I knew those people felt comfortable there, to some extent, the engineers, I knew them from either the planning board or having meetings in Lighthouse park where they came and spoke, like on sewer and stuff. Administratively I didn't realize all the stuff, the bill paying.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh, yeah, customer service 50 Bridge Street.

Jon DePreter:

Customer on Bridge Street. And then the marine. I knew about it, but I didn't get a real understanding of how important it is to the town and what it offers and the size of the boats and the work that's there and the hurricane preparation and the hurricane repair, the fueling and then of course, the hard stuff, the water treatment plant. It's fascinating to me. I'm just one of those guys that likes that kind of stuff.

Melissa Wissel:

Did you get to the wastewater?

Jon DePreter:

I got to the wastewater.

Melissa Wissel:

It's my favorite. That's my favorite thing anytime. I always tell people, and you'll hear it here every time I say anything about the wastewater treatment plant, you'll never flush your toilet the same again.

Jon DePreter:

Yeah, you won't. No. Yeah, yeah. You see the whole process Long and involved process and people take pride in it. Yeah, I mean, there's a real. I walked away, though, in general, moving away from just that particular subject. I walked away with a much deeper appreciation for the city and all the people that work in it and how hard they work and how I get a sense that there's a teamwork communication between the departments. I heard that a lot. And I do appreciate the operation of the city, those core municipal services. I appreciate that and understand it better now.

Melissa Wissel:

If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. We're about halfway through our interview with Commissioner Jon DePreter. He is the newest member of our commission. Commissioner, what. Tell us a little bit about yourself. What do you do when you're, What will you be doing when you're not being a commissioner in your free time, assuming you get..

Jon DePreter:

Pretty much doing what I did before. So I retired 12 years ago. I had a small business and I was also an exhibiting artist. So my days are usually we have a piece of property that has a lot of natural flora and fauna. Well, definitely plants on it and some critters. It takes a little bit of tending too, which I like, so Andre and I share that duty. She got some beautiful gardens. I like to engage with my neighbors, a personal level now that I have the time to do it, which we do a lot. We have good friends in the neighborhood, some family. I do like to go outdoors a lot. My most of my life has been geared toward moving to places that have good outdoor opportunities, so I take advantage of that. I'm a very big fan of going to Anastasia State Park. I think half our neighborhood goes down there. So for surfing, swimming, fishing, just go down the end and watch the sunset. And then, of course, I did try to retire from my artwork, which is specifically more oriented toward wood carving and some metal work, but I just couldn't do it. So I still do that.

Melissa Wissel:

Something that's there in your.. You're not going to just walk away.

Jon DePreter:

Yeah, I'm not going to walk away. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

So, last question. We've got a couple of minutes. What do you love most about St. Augustine and how do you see yourself helping to shape the future of our city? Loaded question to finish on.

Jon DePreter:

Yeah, well, you know, that's what I'm here for. So what I love, I still remember coming here 31 years ago for the first time and pulling into around the Plaza, walking around, specifically the intersection where you have Flagler, which is now the Casa Monica, and the Lightner Building, and just being overwhelmed with the beauty, the architecture, the scale. And then the scale changes dramatically when you go down to the colonial city. I never really knew much about the Spanish history, so I was like hooked right out of the gate. But so that sophisticated downtown, I mean sophisticated in terms of its design, its history, its total uniqueness and its history combined with the natural environment here, which is like said on my website, it's a backdrop for our daily lives in a way. So it's the combination of that in close proximity, at least for me. I'm in Lighthouse park, but I think anybody that's in the city limits can enjoy that. The going back and forth between a really nice downtown and a beautiful natural environment is very difficult. I've lived in probably 11 states at this point in my life as an adult and as a child, as a military child. And I'll tell you, this is a very unique situation.

Melissa Wissel:

It really is.

Jon DePreter:

Having said that, what I would like to do is help protect that. And I'm not protecting in like a reactionary way, but helping to keep that balance between the outdoor and the natural

environment and the beauty of what we have here in a natural way, which is the backdrop to the city and to keep those both dynamic and protected from over excessive use.

Melissa Wissel:

So a big proponent of our land management program that we've just started.

Jon DePreter:

Yeah. Other conservation? Yes, I think that's really good. I think that hits a lot of different factors. I like things that if you do something, maybe you get a couple of wins out of it. It's good for conservation and environment. That's the obvious one. It's good for flooding. We use it to protect flooding. And I think it protects the backdrop for the city, which the backdrop is as important as the backgrounds, as important as the foreground. So I think that's important. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, wonderful. Well, we are just about out of time, so we'll call this a wrap. Any closing thoughts? Any comments?

Jon DePreter:

You were pretty comprehensive, so I'll just leave it here.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay. Well, we'll. We'll keep an eye on how things go. Nice job at your first meeting and congratulations and we're happy to have you.

Jon DePreter:

Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

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.