

The Break Room: Vice Mayor Barbara Blonder, December 31, 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:

Thanks for tuning in and welcome to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications director for the city of St. Augustine. We are at week three out of five of our five week series talking to city commissioners. This week we have Vice Mayor Barbara Blonder in studio. It's fair to say that Commissioner Vice Mayor Blonder is our resident environmentalist and outdoor enthusiast. Although I will say that I think Commissioner DePreter is going to give her a run for her money on the outdoor enthusiast part. Welcome back.

Barbara Blonder:

Thank you, Melissa. It's wonderful to be here and I'm still getting used to that title.

Melissa Wissel:

And congratulations.

Barbara Blonder:

Thank you so much. It really is an honor.

Melissa Wissel:

I'm tickled for you, really. So it's your second term. Congratulations on that as well.

Barbara Blonder:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

Give us a little bit backstory. Let's start with the backstory of how did you come to run for office? I think it's a really great grassroots story.

Barbara Blonder:

Thank you. There's a course that I teach pretty much every semester for the past, oh, 18 years or so. And it's called environmental science. Basically, we call it a couple different things, but it's taught to students at Flagler College who are of any major, they have to take an environmental science course. And so that can be communications or art or sociology or psychology or whatever, or science. And these students in that particular semester, that was 2019. No, 2020, right? Yeah, it was 2020. That fall semester. They actually, it was the year before that. I'd. Sorry. So it was 2019 and we were talking about all the different environmental challenges that we do throughout the entire semester. And the students said, well, we don't, you know, we can do things one, you know, one person at a time. But, you know, what have you done to try to change things? I said, well, I came here to fly for college to try to, you know, to raise awareness with students who are going to be decision makers. And they said, well, I just feel like we need to do more. And I said, well, okay, what? And they're like, well, what about getting running for election? And I'm like, okay, And then they ended up, I had four of them, five of them who were on my campaign team, they were. They. Just. One was an alumnus, in fact.

Melissa Wissel:

very organic. very organic campaign. Did you knock on doors?

Barbara Blonder:

We did not during the pandemic, because that was the pandemic election, but we did walk dogs and through neighborhoods and stopped to talk to people outdoors safely and all that

other stuff. So we got to know people. But it was a challenge, for sure. But, yeah, what a great campaign team.

Melissa Wissel:

Did you. Did you go into it excited, or were you, like, just kind of through your head and not really thinking you would get it? I mean, what was your. I'm sure you wouldn't have done it if you didn't want to.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah, I didn't know whether I wanted to or not. I just felt like I sort of had to take on the challenge and, you know, if I'm going to do something, I'm gonna go all the way and I'm gonna give it my everything. So that whole team and I worked really, really hard, and it worked out. You know, we were. We were so thrilled that it did work out. And my predecessor, she did a great job and was very gracious in, you know, passing the hat. Yeah, yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

You came on board. How was that first two years, your first, or as your first term, learning? Was it what you expected? Was it nothing like what you expected?

Barbara Blonder:

It was. I had no idea what to expect, so I could just say I had no idea what to expect.

Melissa Wissel:

There was no what to expect.

Barbara Blonder:

Exactly. So, I mean, I did. I did follow commission meetings and the work of the city government closely. I did serve on the planning and zoning board for the town that. That we

moved here from up in North Carolina. But. So I knew a bit, you know, but there's so many things I didn't know about and that steep learning curve, just how the commission works together, how we, you know, agree to disagree on topics that we feel very passionate about. But it was that. I think it was just really the first four months or so, you know, getting through the budget cycle, and then that. That was the big learning curve. But, man, I have learned so much, and I am still learning so much. And that's what I love about the job, is being able to learn and problem solve and help our people, you know, in the best way I can.

Melissa Wissel:

Is sunshine a challenge? Sunshine is where you're not allowed to talk to other commissioners offline.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. So we can only talk to other commissioners about anything of substance, as our city attorney calls it. You can talk about barbecue and babies and that's about it with each other. So that message was heard loud and clear. And you know, text messages with each other are things like hey, Merry Christmas or Happy holidays or hope you're feeling better after you got through whatever illness. And otherwise it's nothing that we might ever vote on. And so we don't know what each other are going to say when we're, when we're discussing an important topic. And sometimes we, I think oftentimes we surprise each other, but in good ways for the most part. And I think we're, you know, we, we've. Vice Mayor Horvath just decided to retire from the commission and we have a new commissioner on. And so every time there's a turnover, there is a new personality with different background and, and so it's, it's neat though. I, I really enjoy it.

Melissa Wissel:

And you're, you, you're kind of, as I mentioned in my intro with you, I, I do really, truly see you as our sort of environmental champion. Everybody's kind of got certain things that are their interests, but you've championed our environment on a lot of topics. I want to talk a little bit about the Florida friendly fertilizer use on urban landscapes. That was one of the things that we did a campaign about. And that's not just about land health, but the water health.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. And it's really all about water quality and excess fertilizers running off with rain or irrigation, fertilizer from over fertilized properties. And if that happens and there's too many nutrients that get into our waterways and those cause algal blooms and really can mess up the whole ecosystems and for the worse for all of us.

Melissa Wissel:

There was a recent story in the news about the St. John's river got a bad grade and all this. And I was proud of us. I will give a shout out because you were the champion of this. But one of the things in the news was we need to get the word out and people need to understand that. Thought to myself. I believe Barbara Blonder had us to take care of that. So that was a great. You know, it's a serious issue, but I'm glad that we're ahead of it and having someone like you paying attention to that keeps us on point.

Barbara Blonder:

Thank you. And that's the whole reason I ran, is to try to bring our environment, and I love the way you say it instead of the environment because we're not separate from it. That's what I coach my students to do as well. This is our environment and, and it's critical to our survival and our quality of life. And, yeah, I'm proud to be able to bring my background to the table and so thrilled that, you know, city staff are proactive about all of this. And my fellow commissioners and mayor are really, really on board, which is so cool. Yeah, we are. We are. We are out ahead of a lot of other communities, and that's something we should all take a lot of pride in. We've got work to do. Yeah. But, yeah, we're, we're. We're aware of it and we're working on it.

Melissa Wissel:

If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the city of St. Augustine, and I have Vice Mayor Barbara Blonder in studio with us. Switching gears from the Florida Fertilizers, another one of the environmental missions that you're on is land conservation and acquisition, and we're making leaps and bounds of progress with that. Give us an update on what we have going on with that.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah, we have a formal program that we fund every year now. And before I got on the commission again, the city commission had worked really, really hard with the state to get Fish Island protected as a preserve. And man, what a. What a wonderful diamond we have within our city limits in that. In fact, I have students doing bat research in there.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh, wow.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah, currently. They're looking at bat diversity. And it's just such a wonderful opportunity for us to recognize that we still have some undeveloped land, which doesn't mean it's needs to be developed. Not every piece of land needs to be developed. It just land that is. Has good environmental quality. And we have a formal program of assessing which applications for this program have the best merit at the time so that we can be wise about how we spend the money. But, man, it has been a popular program, and we have willing landowners who are coming to us and saying, you know, we'd rather keep this wonderful piece of property that, you know, my family has a long history with. We'd like to keep it, you know, undeveloped and protected as a conservation land. Within the city. We have gotten up to. It's between 12 and 13% of all of the land in the city is under conservation right now.

Melissa Wissel:

Right now.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah, right now.

Melissa Wissel:

And we're still acquiring more.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. And this is in a highly urbanized environment. So it's not like we're in a rural environment out, you know, in the farm fields. This is highly urbanized. So to have that much in and conservation and working toward more is something we should all be proud of.

Melissa Wissel:

The latest big acquisition was the what we've referred to as the Florida Avenue property, which was tons of marsh..

Barbara Blonder:

really important ecosystem services that land like that offers to us, which means that it helps with our flood control. And that's why The Ravens Wood residents were so passionate about protecting it from development because they knew it would only exacerbate their flooding issues if. If it was developed. And property owner decided that that was the right thing to do. And it was a fair. It was a fair deal.

Melissa Wissel:

And we've got some more coming up, I believe, for review.

Barbara Blonder:

In our January meeting. Yeah, I'm excited about that.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, before we sign off, I wanted to ask you or mention or share with our listeners, there's two funny things. Number one, I want you to tell me a little bit about what you did on your 50th birthday. Which I think is really cool.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. Which was a little while ago.

Melissa Wissel:

It was just a few years ago. Could you see yourself doing it again?

Barbara Blonder:

Maybe. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay, tell us what it is.

Barbara Blonder:

So I decided to ride my bicycle across the country. It took me a little over two months to do it and I averaged 83 miles a day and my husband and son and our dog followed along behind me in a camper van. So it was. It was an amazing experience to see the country that way and to be out of a car and be able to just stop and talk to people and it was amazing. I would love to do it. Maybe not that one, but something. Yeah, I love. I'm on my bicycle at least a couple of times a week.

Melissa Wissel:

Pick another route or another. Maybe a Route 66.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah, something like that.

Melissa Wissel:

did you camp the whole time?

Barbara Blonder:

No, because at 50 years of age... But yeah, and I still bicycle regularly. Yesterday I was on the bike path out by Elkton and we. My friend and I. We went together and we stopped and watched an otter play for like 10 minutes. It was super cool. So, yeah, that's kind of thing that really I love to do.

Melissa Wissel:

That's awesome.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

And then before we sign off, I do want to share with our listeners because I think this was a very funny, fun fact. You were a DJ.

Barbara Blonder:

Yeah. Much time has passed since then. But, yeah, when I was at University of New Hampshire as an undergrad, I was an overnight radio show DJ, and Free Bird was the song I hated most because I kept getting phone requests to play it at four in the morning and also a reggae show. So it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed that. I bet Dan McCook, my colleague over here at Flagler College, didn't even know that he might have.

Melissa Wissel:

Terrific.

Barbara Blonder:

I learned a lot about music doing that.

Melissa Wissel:

Awesome. Well, I love having you come in. The whole purpose of these interviews this series is to introduce our commissioners to our listeners. Say goodbye to 2024, hello to 2025. And we've got a lot of great work ahead of us. And so excited to have you on the commission.

Barbara Blonder:

Me too. Thank you very much. Yeah, I think we ended up 2024 really strong, and we have. We have a lot of momentum going into 2025. So thank you for, for doing this series. I really appreciate it.

Melissa Wissel:

And anytime you got something you want to talk about, you know, you just have to call.

Barbara Blonder:

All right, you got a deal.

Melissa Wissel:

All right. Thanks again for coming in.

Barbara Blonder:

Sure thing.

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.