

The Break Room: Commissioner Cynthia Garris, January 14, 2025

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. Thanks for tuning in. It's our fifth and final interview with our city commission this week. Closing out the series, Commissioner Cynthia Garris. She is our first black female elected commissioner, not just for the city of St. Augustine, but also in St. John's County. And Commissioner Garris is also the first ever city employee to go on to serve in public office. She worked for the city for 13 years, retired in 2021 as our facilities coordinator. She is no stranger to the day to day operations of the city of St. Augustine. Commissioner Garris, welcome back.

Cynthia Garris:

Thank you. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak out about the city. Being a commissioner has been great. I like to love people where they're at. There's a lot of people that are happy about, you know, my success being a commissioner and then there's a lot of people that come before the commission with different issues. And I try to listen to everyone's concerns, which is very important.

Melissa Wissel:

You very much do. Is it what you expected?

Cynthia Garris:

It is what I expected as far as the meetings, because, you know, we, I got to observe the meetings, being an employee, but it's so much more to it than just the meetings. It's really going out in the public, going to a lot of events. And I wanted to be a commissioner that was seen, not just one in name only. So usually when I get invited to stuff, I try to push myself to go unless there's an overlap. And you know how that is because you help me monitor my schedule. So I try to go to everything and I got called by somebody yesterday and that's why they make the movie thing at the last minute. But I try to be available. I try to be respectful and I definitely like to listen to the concerns when people come before our commission meetings.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, it's, it's a lot. You, I mean, it certainly can be a full time job. I know that it's, it is not technically a full time job the way that the position is. You get a stipend, so you get a little bit for it, but you're not, you're not going to be buying any Second homes down in the key.

Cynthia Garris:

We don't get the income that, you know, the commission, county and so forth. So.

Melissa Wissel:

But it's a labor of love and I would agree. I think that is one of your signature things about Commissioner Garris. You are always at events. You support the county, you support the sheriff's office, you support the beach. All of our commissioners support all of our communities around us. So I don't want it to sound as if they don't as well, but I do know that that is something that you are making a priority. What would you say is one of the most something that's really made an impression on you. You've been in office now for two of your four years, so you're halfway through. What stands out as anything in particular, good or bad? Anything.

Cynthia Garris:

Well, good. I'm glad that we're getting ready to the Brownies project is getting ready to come back up and that is one thing that I know will help with nights and lights in the future once we get another parking garage because people won't have to be circling and we won't

have the bottleneck traffic and it will free up some time that the residents have to spend trying to get to their homes. I think that that's going to be a plus not only for downtown on navigation, it will also be a plus because the business is on the west side to get a chance to thrive. Because when they once they park in that garage, they can go west as well as east. And so I think that those businesses will flourish. I know the revenue for the businesses properties have already gone up because of some purchases over there. They really don't go by the place. They go by what the selling price is. So I know that some businesses were bought not too long ago for a million dollars over there. And so it's going to be a blessing. It's going to be a blessing because we're going to have that going on. I witnessed the Knights of Lights traffic coming over the Bridge of Lions and had to sit there for an hour and something. So I really have empathy for the people that are going through, you know, the extra traffic. But we're. It's a blessing to live in a city that's so beautiful that everybody wants to come witness and traffic is not just from nights of lights. We always have traffic congestion at different times of the day.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. You were mentioning West City. I know that West Augustine, you live there, as do I. Where I would agree with you. We're seeing positive, very positive change over there. You also can put Your stamp of approval on a project, the sidewalk or the crosswalk? You want to talk about that?

Cynthia Garris:

I know that was something you Champion Elder Deli Sands came to one of the meetings, and she expressed her concern about the residents that go to her church. She has remnant outreach, which is located in the O Shiloh Church on West King Street. And she was at fear that somebody was going to get injured crossing the streets because when people come down the hill from the railroad tracks traveling east, they speed up because they don't want anybody to come out of South Whitney and cut them off. And so what happens is they like ram through that area and that's where the church is. And there's also a business, a barber shop that's located across from the church. And so if somebody's trying to cross the street, they were kind of like at arms way. So when she came before the commission, the city commission, she was told that that was owned by the county.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Cynthia Garris:

And so. And so she was basically kind of blown off. And so I took it upon myself to reach out to her and to reach out to Sarah Arnold, who was the chair of the county commission. And we took a meeting in my mom's yard, which is parked right next door to the church. And she got to witness the racing in that window of time before I got there, because she beat me to the property. And so we walked the property and I explained to her, so we, we the city, we had been trying on our own for a while and we weren't getting anywhere. We were getting held up with different red tape and so forth. And so she cut through the red tape. I took a meeting with her and their public safety person, and then we got the ball rolling and they gave the permit. They did go out to make sure it warranted. We did send our mobility team out and they monitored it to make sure that it was really a crosswalk was needed there. Why they never pursued a crosswalk before. Now, I guess it took Elderly to be the one to push that initiative. She has a lot of children that go to that church. So anyway, we got the crosswalk and then they were still barreling through. So then we put the sign that you're going to get fined up, and they still are going somewhat through, but next month we're going to have the flashers go up. Oh, wow. The flashes have come in and the flashes will be installed and then they will visibly see the yellow signs, lights coming up. So I'm very happy about that. It's funny because I see some pastors that have been at the church and it's like, whoa, we should have got on that. And I said, well, you guys never asked. And. But you know, that church has been there for over 100 and something years and it's long overdue. So I was glad to be a part of that initiative. And I thank Sara Ano again in case she sees this.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Cynthia Garris:

For her input. And I think when you work together, when you work together with other commissioners, we're capable of getting a lot of stuff done in our community.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I was going to say just taking that on and like you said, you. You took it upon yourself to just make that a priority. And it's one little thing at a time. Yes, sometimes it is. It's just those little bitty one. Those one offs.

Cynthia Garris:

Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Such a difference.

Cynthia Garris:

We're all busy in our lives and we all got something that we're striving to do. But sometimes little things become huge things. All I could visualize is somebody going to church or leaving church and getting hit by a car, and I just didn't want that. I couldn't sleep well with that. So, you know, that gave me the adrenaline to push forward.

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 this week it is my pleasure to be chatting with City Commissioner Cynthia Garris. Any goals you have for the next two years, Anything in particular you're kind of tracking or just things that you've got your eye on?

Cynthia Garris:

Yes, The Fullerwood, there was a lot of residents from Fullerwood that came before the commission recently expressing their concerns about the flooding we do have where we're buying property to enhance homes and prevent homes from catching flooding from building. And so I would like to see those things happen. It's very difficult when you live in a neighborhood and you have no control over the environment. And unfortunately, one of the disadvantages of living in Florida, we encumber a lot of hurricanes and we can't, unfortunately we can't pick up our house and go somewhere with it. So to protect those individuals, we have been really be doing good on those land and acquisitions and property

so far. We were able to buy some property over on Florida Avenue and we have now we're looking at a couple of places, a place in Fullerwood and some other places that are coming up to protect homes.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Cynthia Garris:

So I'm looking forward to being a part of that. I'm also looking forward to getting out and visiting more churches in our community. Because when I was campaigning I told him that I would be back. And I have been back to some of the churches. But I would just like to go and fellowship with people because that's like the best time to love on people as in a spiritual realm.

Melissa Wissel:

Sure. And you're, you are part of Rotary?

Cynthia Garris:

Yes, I am part of Rotary. I am part of Rotary and I enjoy that. We go, we meet at Mondays at the Casa Monica. The food is to die for. And the speakers are good as well. We have some good speakers. Matter of fact, we had Dee Brown that works for, for the city. He came and gave an update on what's going on in our city. As far as there is some people that are pickpocketing cell phones down on St. George Street. So people have your phones, don't put your phones in your back pocket. And it was told that they were some Hispanic women that was doing it more so and they tracked the phones and they were going down south to like maybe Miami because they could do the find your phone. And so it was a group. It was not really so for the money. What they doing with those phones? I don't know. Maybe they're cleaning them and selling them, I don't know. But he did bring that to our attention. And so we just have to be mindful, especially with a lot of people, if you do go out and about to be more mindful where your money is, where your phone is and just be more cautious.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay, I'm going to ask you a very off the cuff question. I'm gonna put you on the spot. You gonna come back and run again?

Cynthia Garris:

I plan to run again.

Melissa Wissel:

You don't have to answer.

Cynthia Garris:

I plan to run again. I wasn't going to probably make that total decision until July.

Melissa Wissel:

This is an unofficial inquiry.

Cynthia Garris:

I'm just curious. I've been approached by a lot of people that want to donate to my campaign and I was like, no, slow down. Because once you start taking donations, you have to start doing all those reports. And that was not one of my favor. So I'll wait a little while on that.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I think my guess would be, and I would think this would be true in your case. This is just my opinion that if you can see the good in what you're doing, you love doing it, or it's something that you're passionate about, you would want to run again. Because you would not you personally, even just an individual who is serving would feel that their work isn't done.

Cynthia Garris:

Well, a friend of Mine, his name is Pop Terry. He's well known in our community. The last conversation I had with him was, you can't just go one term because you don't have enough time to get things done. So in order for you to be really successful, you need to be in two terms. And I had just gotten in, so I was looking kind of simple at him, like. Yeah, but he's right because, you know, being halfway through, you can see all the things you want to do. It's a blessing. I give God all the credit for me being a commissioner, and I feel like I'm on the platform serving him, and so I'm going to let him guide me through the course of what I do next. And so I'm looking forward to see what the city's going to do in 2025.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah, well, you never know. We just had Vice Mayor Commissioner Roxanne Horvath stepped down. She'd been on the commission 15, 16 years, many, many years. And I would imagine you don't necessarily going into it thinking you'll be on that long, but if there's work to be done and the community agrees with what you're doing, I can't see stopping you.

Cynthia Garris:

Yeah, I don't see myself doing 16 years, but, yeah, I see myself being there for a minute, but because my kids live in some amazing places and I want to have the freedom to go and travel, and I know a lot of the commissioners, the commission goes and travels and takes time off, but there's just so much in the world to see. So to say I'm gonna be on it for a decade is kind of like, what?

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we're happy to have you. We appreciate the work you do, and we'll keep that conversation going. No promises today.

Cynthia Garris:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

But you're thinking about it.

Cynthia Garris:

I'm thinking about it.

Melissa Wissel:

All right. Well, thank you for coming and chatting with us. It's always great to have you.

Cynthia Garris:

Thank you for this opportunity.

Melissa Wissel:

In the coming weeks, we'll be talking to city staff, including City Manager David Birchim and Assistant City Managers Meredith Bridenstine and Ruben Franklin. Be sure to tune in. There's lots going on in the city, and we want to keep you up to speed. 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. There's a complete listing at citystaugradio.com. follow us on all of our social platforms. You'll see us on Facebook, Instagram and X @citystaug. Thanks again 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.