

The Break Room with City Manager David Birchim, January 21, 2025

Narrator: You've tuned into 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. We've concluded our series with the City Commission and now we're moving on to city staff. Starting at the top. I've invited city manager David Birchim to join us this week. David has worked for the city of St. Augustine for over 25 years and now a city manager. I'm sure the perspective is quite different. David, welcome back.

David Birchim: Thank you very much.

Melissa Wissel: So, you started with the city in 1997. And I, as I was thinking about my life and since 1997, I can't imagine what you've seen in the city over all of those years. You mind starting out and kind of give us a walk through your history of, of being with the city?

David Birchim: Sure. I started off as a planner, city planner, in the planning and building department, just an entry level position. And I did all of the building permit reviews, site plan reviews for building permits. I did all the staff reports for the planning and zoning board, all the staff reports for the historic architectural review board. I reviewed all of the new business licenses. They were called business licenses at that time. For code compliance. I answered all zoning questions. I was the only planner working for the city at that time.

Melissa Wissel: And how many do we have? So, you were the only one doing all of that. And as you were just describing that, I'm thinking Jacob Fredrickson, Shelley Clayton, Victoria Murphy. I'm thinking all of the staff we have now.

David Birchim: Yeah, we've probably got six or seven people doing that.

Melissa Wissel: Doing that one job. So that would also be indicative of how times have changed.

David Birchim: Times have changed. Yep. And back then, we didn't have internet access. We didn't at city hall. We didn't have city cell phones for staff.

Melissa Wissel: You had that thing called a dial. Like, did you have dial? Maybe they were push button by then, 97. Yeah, we were away from dials. Chords, though.

David Birchim: If you wanted to talk to an employee who was out in the field, we had walkie talkies.

Melissa Wissel: Oh, nice.

David Birchim: Yeah, it was old school.

Melissa Wissel: Very old school. Okay. So, you went from being the planner.

David Birchim: Yep.

Melissa Wissel: Up to.

David Birchim: And I worked my way up through the planning department. And finally, um, I was director of the planning and building department for, I don't know, eight years, something like that. And then John Regan promoted me to assistant city manager. And now I've been city manager for about a year and a half.

Melissa Wissel: And the assistant city manager was kind of a. I mean, I wouldn't, I don't know that I would say it was made for you, but it was needed because you, you really were in so many meetings. I recall that and it was like, okay, I'm the director and I need to be in all these meetings, and I can't do both. So that was a little bit of a shift in our organization in a good way.

David Birchim: It was good for me. I got a lot of good experience. I miss planning and building. You know, I did a lot of real estate stuff for the city manager at the time. But it was a great experience. And I value that experience.

Melissa Wissel: There's a lot, I would imagine, I know, I always tell my employees, which, you know, there's so much in the city to understand and to know. And so as assistant city manager, I would imagine, as assistant, you get to be in the meetings, but you're not responsible, ultimately.

David Birchim: Right.

Melissa Wissel: But that also gives you that insight to those bigger projects.

David Birchim: Right.

Melissa Wissel: So, Ruben now. took your position as assistant. And so those are things like the Browdy Project, the smart streets, the...

David Birchim: Everything, yeah.

Melissa Wissel: Everything. But you're still, so now what is your perspective now that you're in that seat? Is it everything you thought it would be, nothing at all? Is it...

David Birchim: No. Well, there's no way to prepare for it. And John Regan and Bill Harris actually told me that you really can't prepare for it until you get there. You just don't have any idea what it's going to take to do it. And they were right.

Melissa Wissel: Drinking out of a fire hose.

David Birchim: Yeah, there was a lot of that. The first year was challenging, very challenging.

Melissa Wissel: Anything stick out in your mind that you're like, okay, whoa, in particular, even just the little things.

David Birchim: The stress that comes along with hurricane season was, yeah, thank gosh we have Carlos Aviles as our as our Fire Chief.

Melissa Wissel: Yeah.

David Birchim: But that was unexpected and a big challenge. I realized that a lot of people in town knew me or pretended that they knew me.

Melissa Wissel: Okay. You got a lot of more friends now?

David Birchim: Yeah, I got a lot more friends now.

Melissa Wissel: You get invited to a lot more stuff.

David Birchim: I do, I get invited to a lot of things. I can't make everything. And I apologize for people who are, I can't make their... functions. And then I have overall, you know, responsibility for all the departments now. So, I'm learning a lot more in depth about departments that I really didn't have much exposure to before.

Melissa Wissel: Right. Any of those departments that, again, for me, I think it would just be like you just said, there's a lot more than you would have expected. A lot of our things. Anything you could say, like the hardest thing? or maybe the best thing on either of those extremes, anything come to mind?

David Birchim: Well, I mean, it's all been hard, I'll be honest with you. The best experience so far has been working through our new conservation acquisition program. And just because it's been very rewarding, and it was an initiative that was started by Commissioner Blonder. But all the commissioners are behind it, and it has broad public support. So that's been a very rewarding activity for me.

Melissa Wissel: I would imagine the rewarding programs are the best, not the ones that you get beat up about. Yeah, absolutely. Well, we'll talk about that one in just a second. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel,

Communications Director for the city. And we're talking with David Birchim. He is our city manager. It's been with the city now over 25 years, just talking about perspectives, talking about the good and the bad. And I'm going to just put this out there because I know we're going to be talking about it at a commission meeting. And I think it's a topic that people would love to hear about. Let's talk a little bit about Nights of Lights.

David Birchim: Well...

Melissa Wissel: It's big. It was like the biggest, we're kind of. Sorry, I don't mean to cut you off. Really the biggest and busiest year that we've seen, I think.

David Birchim: The busiest year we've seen for sure.

Melissa Wissel: Yeah.

David Birchim: And we did not have the resources to handle level of visitation. So, we found ourselves short on everything from trash cans to bathrooms. We found it difficult to respond to emergency calls. We saw our transportation system at a standstill because so many people were coming in at the same time that our shuttle system was paralyzed. We couldn't get in and out.

Melissa Wissel: Yeah. We offer this great shuttle service, but we get stuck in our own traffic.

David Birchim: We got stuck in our own traffic. So, it was everything that all these different disciplines that go along with putting together the Nights of Lights, we found deficiencies. And we're working on a report that we'll give to the city commission on February 10th. And we're going to show the community, here's what happened. Here's our staffing level. Here's where we need help. And I'm meeting with community leaders now and going over that very thing.

Melissa Wissel: Right.

David Birchim: I think there's a lot of room for improvement and we've got some good ideas on how we can make improvements. And we're looking at this, not just for Nights of Lights. We believe that if this is sort of the, and I hate to say this cliché term, but if this is the new normal, if this level of visitation is what we're going to see for 4th of July and for all of, you know, for...

Melissa Wissel: The, what do we call it, the off season? Yeah. Which we don't really have anymore.

David Birchim: All the events that bring in big crowds, the Christmas parade and the Easter parade and the regatta of lights and sing out loud. If we see these types of crowds for those events also, we really need to know how to manage them more effectively.

Melissa Wissel: Well, even the Amp. has a very robust programming schedule of artists. So, people come for that, which kind of ties into Sing Out Loud. And there's that balance, I think, at the last commission meeting, the commissioners all resonated very, they were keenly hearing the residents, keenly in tune with the frustrations. And like you just said, keeping up with that pace. And it takes more than just money. You were just mentioning resources. It's not just about pouring more money into something.

David Birchim: That's right. And there's equity about where the money comes from. So, we're very sensitive to address the feelings of the residents who feel the impacts of these big events, but not necessarily the benefits. And they shouldn't necessarily be burdened with paying for.

Melissa Wissel: Right.

Daivd Birchim: the management of those events through their taxes.

Melissa Wissel: Well, and as a resident, you live in the city as well, you often feel like you don't even really get to enjoy it yourself because there's so many people, you feel like I think the mayor may have been the one to say it, we live here, this is our city that we live in and we're certainly love to have people come and visit us, but it becomes unlivable to actually enjoy being a resident. And that, I think, is like you just said, it's that balance, making sure that our residents know that we hear them. Speaking really quickly about living here, you've lived in downtown since you got here.

David Birchim: I have. I've lived in the same house in Lincolnville since 2000. Before that, I lived in a small house on South St. George Street. It was owned by Hildegard Pacetti. It's one of her houses.

Melissa Wissel: OK.

Daivd Birchim: Bless her heart. passed on now, little cottage.

Melissa Wissel: Is it still there?

David Birchim: It's still there.

Melissa Wissel: Okay.

David Birchim: I paid \$425 a month.

Melissa Wissel: Wow.

David Birchim: To rent the whole house. And she had, she was a real, she was great person, very unique woman, a lot of character. She had a handwritten lease that I had to sign. And it didn't allow me to have pets, but I had a pet turtle.

Melissa Wissel: Okay.

David Birchim: So, she had to. I remember distinctly sitting down and she had to cross out no pets and write in and handwriting. Her cursive of handwriting, except one turtle.

Melissa Wissel: Okay.

David Birchim: And I had to initial it. It was a great house.

Melissa Wissel: That's great.

David Birchim: Yep.

Melissa Wissel: Did you have a parking issue? I don't think you probably had to worry about having a parking permit or anything like that back then.

David Birchim: Never had a parking issue back then.

Melissa Wissel: Oh, well. And I know you can certainly empathize and relate with flooding your current house. I know you had to have elevated. So. You're in it with us.

David Birchim: Yeah, my house flooded out during Hurricane Matthew, and I had to elevate it. And in doing so, I had to tear off the back and the front and I had to go to HARB for the partial demolition. I had to go to PZB to address the setback variance all right after Hurricane Matthew. And so, I understand the experience.

Melissa Wissel: You get it. Yeah, well, I think it's a great, it's... You know, living in the city, you definitely, I feel that too, you are among the people who live here, so you can speak as a resident as well as our city manager. Well, thank you for coming and talking with us. We'll look forward to the report. I promise to have mine on your desk in time. So, lots of good things happening in the city though. And from where I sit, I think you're doing a great job. So, thank you for all that you do for us. And we'll have you back to talk again soon.

David Birchim: Okay, great, thanks.

Melissa Wissel: In the coming weeks, we're going to continue introducing you to city staff that we haven't heard from in a while or that you haven't met before, including assistant city managers, Meredith Breidenstein and Ruben Franklin. And we're going to get an update from visitor information center staff about some modified operations coming due to the repairs of the original heart pine floors at the VIC. There's a lot 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, or you want to listen to our past episodes, you can find us at citystaugradio.com. Be sure to follow us on our social platforms. We're on Facebook, Instagram, and X @City St. Aug. Thanks again for tuning in. Until next time.

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.