

# Land Management Coordinator JB Miller, January 28, 2025

## Transcript

Narrator:

You've tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the city of Saint Augustine works from those who do the work every day, hosted by the city of St. Augustine. 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 and thanks for tuning in! This week on The Break Room, I have a returning guest. The Cities Land Management Coordinator JB Miller, joining us to talk about the completed acquisition of the Fish Island Preserve and upcoming ribbon-cutting ceremony, and to give us an update on the Cities Conservation Program. JB Welcome back!

JB Miller:

Good afternoon.

Melissa Wissel:

You're keeping us busy.

JB Miller:

We have a lot going on!

Melissa Wissel:

Land well Cities conservation program. Let's rewind back. I was looking at the last time you were on The Break Room and I think it was in 2020, which blows my mind. That was a big year though, with the... right after the acquisition.

JB Miller:

Acquisition... right after the acquisition and right after COVID.

Melissa Wissel:

Right after COVID, take us back and tell us about Fish Island. Fifty-nine acres.

JB Miller:

OK.

Melissa Wissel:

It was a major preservation victory, a true example of local residents grassroots, no pun intended. Looking to save that land.

JB Miller:

Yeah, it was. It was a big win for the community. For sure, it was fortunately to put it in perspective. The...trying to say it. It was part of...The state has a program, the Florida Forever acquisition program, and it had already been identified as part, and piece of an area that was called the Northeast Florida Blueways.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

JB Miller:

And so fortunately it was on that list. And then the local folks found out. "Oh my goodness, this may happen. This may become a development." It was slated for one hundred and I think it was forty-three units. And that's exactly they just got up in arms and and talked to. The city and.

Melissa Wissel:

Said no.

JB Miller:

Said "No, this is a terrible idea." And and so that's. Yeah, that was kind of where it started. The impetus for it.

Melissa Wissel:

And to put it in perspective for those listening who don't know. Fish Island is on the southeast side of the 312 Bridge. Just South of what is now Antigua condos and apartments that condo. So, imagine Antigua having a sister complex, basically a companion, potentially companion complex. On the other side of 312.

JB Miller:

Potentially right.

Melissa Wissel:

And that was where folks said, "Woah, woah, what are we doing?" And they created was it Friends of Fish Island? Was the group?

JB Miller:

There was Friend of Fish Island. That was the group that really did the did all the heavy lifting in terms of leg work and stuff like that. But they also utilized the Florida, the North Florida Land Trust and they negotiated, and the potential, the developer. The owner, who was not technically developer, anyway...The Owner said. "Yeah, I'll consider selling it to the state." And so the Land Trust negotiated a deal that was that was a.

Melissa Wissel:

Huge.

JB Miller:

Huge deal. For the Land Trust be able to do it because they can move much more quickly. And barely got it acquired in time 'cause. It was going to some sort of bank receivership or something. Don't remember the details and it happened in a very short period of time in terms of. How things normally happen when a state acquires a piece property and that was in November of 2019. And within a year, the city is the manager and there was a lease that was. It took a while to develop the lease and so the property is actually leased to the city from the state.

Melissa Wissel:

And near our Land Management Coordinator. So part of that agreement with the state is that we have a program to maintain, keep it clean, keep it manicured trails.

JB Miller:

Have to get it, have to...

Melissa Wissel:

Tell us what it looks like now.

JB Miller:

It's been awhile.

Melissa Wissel:

It's been five years.

JB Miller:

There has to be a management plan approved by the state. And it's a management plan that is basically following the same type of management plans that a State Park, or a State Forest or wildlife management area would have. And so that was one of the reasons I was brought out of retirement. It was to help 'cause I had written those in a previous life.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we didn't want you to get, you know, bored at home.

JB Miller:

Yeah stale. So that all happened, and yet it requires us to do you know quite a bit, but it's it's the basic maintenance you would do on a natural area. So we have a really... for those that haven't been there. We have a nice trail system. If you walk every bit of it, you might make just under two miles. Those are maintained. The exotic plants are also under a maintenance program, there are interpretive panels and signs, and we're working this year, hopefully to build an observation platform, a very low, you know, maybe the top of the deck is five or six feet so you can lookout over the marsh. So hopefully that'll happen.

Melissa Wissel:

On the riverside or in the internal side?

JB Miller:

Overlooking the marsh to the West towards Matanzas River.

Melissa Wissel:

It's a beautiful piece of property, but the other reason why we want to talk about it this week we have a ribbon-cutting, because we also just acquired what I like to call, closing the hole of the donut. But there was a cut out piece of property that was still privately owned. Separate from the parcel that was sold to the state and we now have that. We actually own that.

JB Miller:

The city owns that, correct. That was a little over two and a half acres and that happened over this year... excuse me, late last year.

Melissa Wissel:

Right, yeah.

JB Miller:

It's pretty bad I don't know what year we are in.

Melissa Wissel:

2025, yes.

JB Miller:

And so yeah, that happened and that was a really big thing that the property was purchased from a third party entity, which for those of you who don't know. Paul Thompson, Thompson Realty and a couple other parties. And that was a...and it was very generous of him. I guess. Can plug him in a nice way. Because what he did is he donated his...their ownings to Flagler College, and then... so the city technically bought it from Flagler College, and that was great.

Melissa Wissel:

So now that whole piece of parcel won't be built.

JB Miller:

And nobody will know the difference of who owns it or.

Melissa Wissel:

Anything like that? But it's a beautiful piece. So the ribbon-cutting. I know you're all on the edge of your seats. When's the ribbon-cutting? It will be on Friday, February seventh at 11:00 AM.

Melissa Wissel:

Talk to me a little bit, um...We were talking about planning this ribbon-cutting...It's a. It's a bit a little bit of a walk out to a location inside. That's right in that... is it in the in holding? Right on edge of the in holding.

JB Miller:

It's right on the edge, that's right.

Melissa Wissel:

But parking is very limited.

JB Miller:

Parking is extremely limited.

Melissa Wissel:

So maybe ride your bikes, carpool with a friend. But, come and see us.

JB Miller:

Please do come.

Melissa Wissel:

On the seventh.

JB Miller:

On the seventh, and it will be obviously a relatively short ceremony with a couple speakers, and then we'll be giving a walk. I will be giving a walk afterwards if there's interest. And it's just to commemorate the fact that the property is whole. To use your terminology.

Melissa Wissel:

Yes, yes it is. The property has been made whole without a hole. That's great. So we hope to see folks out there. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm talking with JB. He's the cities Land Management Coordinator. Just wrapping up a chat about Fish Island, we have completed the entire parcel. And we're going to have a ribbon-cutting on Friday, February seventh at 11:00 AM. Be sure to check it out if you can't make the ribbon-cutting, go ahead and check out that property. It's a beautiful piece. Go out and walk the trails. But now also switching gears. JB, you don't only manage that Fish Island management plan, you're in charge of sort of... the parcels and the properties that the city is acquiring through its Conservation Program. So again, we're keeping a very busy tell us about the Conservation Program that has been underway now kind of that was sparked by this a little bit.

JB Miller:

Yeah, without question. We have a city Commission that is very supportive of that. Certainly spearheaded by Vice Mayor Barbara Blonder. There is...We just acquired the first parcel technically under the program as we know it and that is a piece in the very southeast corner of Ravenswood. It's called the Sobenesdesme property. That's the owner, or the seller. It's adjacent to... for those that might know about, it's adjacent to what was called the Florida Avenue acquisition, which is still a conservation acquisition. But It was not...There was no formalized program at that point. And so those both properties will be known as soon as it gets approved, we think Ravenswood Park... is the name that we're suggesting. And that's together they're almost nine acres.

Melissa Wissel:

Wow!

JB Miller:

Yeah, it's it's it's lot.

Melissa Wissel:

That's a big piece of property.

JB Miller:

It's a lot of land in that area. And very excited about that, of course. Other properties have been already ranked by our ranking committee and they're to go before the Commission for possible approval.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

JB Miller:

So maybe in an update at some point, certainly on social media, that will put out the information. If those indeed happen.

Melissa Wissel:

And there's a there's a process that folks are listening, wondering how do we, how did the city come to be acquiring these? There's a process. There's an application and it's timed so that we can account for this in our fiscal plan. In our budgets.

JB Miller:

It is so if you go to the city's website under conservation program, one of the drop downs. There's an application so anybody can submit an application. If you're an agent working for an owner, then there's something additional that one would have to sign. Basically, if you're legally representing a landowner, you can do it as well. And submit the application, we have a committee that's made-up of, I forget now seven. I think it Members, yeah, staff members. six maybe.

Melissa Wissel:

Staff, yeah.

JB Miller:

And we have a ranking process. We rank the properties and then we give that rank list to this Commission and they at that point can follow our recommendations or not, and that does...it's not meant to be snarky sounding. It's just they have other priorities that that are perhaps our ranking criteria wouldn't take into consideration.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

JB Miller:

And so that's how it moves forward. So right now there are, as I mentioned, three properties up for potential acquisition.

Melissa Wissel:

And rewind again a little bit. Where did this come from? What? Why did we decide to do this? Because didn't want development. Didn't want.

JB Miller:

Yeah, it's it's more, there's more than that.

Melissa Wissel:

There's more to it?

JB Miller:

Yeah, having small pocket parks within neighborhoods is always a huge plus. Just for the neighborhood, but for the city in general. Also, there's a big resiliency component, you know, if some of these properties and couple of them they were looking at are very, very, very wet during times when things are very wet. And the fact that they will never be developed is a very good thing. Because when you start to infill those areas for development that can increase flooding in adjacent areas depending on the amount of infill. So yeah, there's, but there's it's just the quality of life I mean the ecosystem services that these properties provide is pretty substantial.

Melissa Wissel:

And it's really part of our resiliency initiative being environmentally aware.

JB Miller:

And the comp plan within the comp plan as well.

Melissa Wissel:



Yep, comp plan. Do you know, I'm going to put you on the spot. Do you know the percentage of our land? I know vice Mayor, Blonder, mentioned something about the percentage of our land? You're looking at me like "aww."

JB Miller:

You know, I calculated that for her and I can't remember what it was. Sorry.

Melissa Wissel:

I wanna say it was ten, was it ten? Thirteen or twelve? I mean it was...

JB Miller:

It's over ten percent.

Melissa Wissel:

It's a number though. That is an impressive number. By those type of standards explain that a little bit.

JB Miller:

It's an impressive number when you have a city that's mostly built out. You know, if it's a newer city that's expanding, you know, then those you can do a little better planning you know, but. St. Augustine has been, and I are, I'm sure, planning department could tell us exactly what the percentage is, but there's not a lot available green space. So a six acres as I just mentioned, these two acquisitions in a city that. Cities is approximately sit little over

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

JB Miller:

So that's even though that seems small. Six acres. If you live in that community, that's not small, of course.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

JB Miller:

It makes for a wonderful hiking trail.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, six acres to buy a piece of property in the city, limit any any property in the city limits that's. Six acres, that's huge.

JB Miller:

Huge. That's huge.

Melissa Wissel:

That that's a huge piece of property.

JB Miller:

One of the properties we're looking at right now is ten acres. Now a lot of that ten acres is Marsh. Salt marsh, but still large.

Melissa Wissel:

And We're OK with that because it's saves, it's that conservation, and we're not going to do anything I know there was a. Probably Speaking of one of those properties where we're recording on one day and some of this may have transpired by the time this goes on air, but, just because we're buying them doesn't mean we're going develop them.

JB Miller:

Well, the the goal. Once a piece of property is acquired than we do it's basically a management perspective and that will go on the website so people can read that and it will say yes, this is what we anticipate doing and a management plan will be written and approved by the Commission, which says this is what we will be doing. And in all cases, I know the Commissioners are pretty unanimous about that, as it'll be very, very low key.

Melissa Wissel:

Passive park, green space.

JB Miller:

Very, very passive recreation where ther'll be hiking. Somebody could of course bicycle the trails. If there aren't enough. And picnic tables and you know, of course, definitely we're going to focus on interpretive information. While people are there enjoying it. Good to learn. And talk about both the history as well at the cultural history, but as well as the Natural History of the areas.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we're glad to have you keeping us in line and keeping our Land Management organized and exciting news and hope that folks will come and meet up with us on Friday, February seventh for the ribbon-cutting and thank you for all the work that you do for us.

JB Miller:

You are very welcome, alright.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks for coming by. If you miss part of this broadcast, you want to go back and listen from the beginning. You can find us on your favorite podcasting app. For complete listing at [CityStAugRadio.com](http://CityStAugRadio.com) we want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city. Follow us on all of our social platforms. You'll find us on Facebook X and Instagram at [CityStAug](http://CityStAug.com). Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of Saint 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.