

Assistant City Manager, Meredith Breidenstein, February 11, 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'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. Now your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room. Thanks for tuning in. If you've caught our last few episodes, we've spoken with JB Miller about the Cities Land Management program as well as Barb Moore about projects around the city, paid for with grant funding. Now this week, joining me in The Break Room to connect the dots of how these projects relate to the cities annual budget and our strategic plan I've invited. Assistant City Manager Meredith Breidenstein, Meredith. It's been a few years. Welcome back.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Thank you Thanks for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

I we were thinking 2019, maybe not. But It's been a while. And you've had a lot of changes in your role.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Since that maybe we could just start off with a little bit of not quite sure. Were you assistant city manager at the time? But you've been with us now twenty years this month.

Meredith Breidenstein:

This month is twenty years with the city.

Melissa Wissel:

Congratulations.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Thank you. And yes, you're right. I've had a couple of different roles, a few different roles. I started out in the finance department. My title was actually financial Services group manager when I started. Then that turned into deputy director of finance in 2016. I Became the city 's Director of Budget and Performance Management. Which turned into Hurricane Recovery

Melissa Wissel:

Another long title came into what Hurricane Hurricane Recovery management.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Turned into hurricane recovery because 2016 was a big year. And then in 2019 I became Assistant City Manager for the city. and I've been in that role ever since

Melissa Wissel:

and we also have course. Reuben Franklin is our other Assistant City Manager. You kind of.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Keep an eye on the finance side of things.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, I'm looking at finances, staffing, internal operations. Really the day-to-day. And I would say just, you know, kind of rule of thumb Reubens looking outside, he's made in projects.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Looking at how these things affect the public. Yeah, we we work together very well. We share a lot of responsibilities, but we also have our own responsibilities.

Melissa Wissel:

And just to note, that's different than what our finance department does, because we actually do have a finance director and a deputy director and they.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

How would you put their role... If you're inside Reubens outside, where does that finance department fit in that picture?

Meredith Breidenstein:

It's really. Consider that an internal service they are making sure paychecks are cut.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Making sure our vendors get paid. They're making sure that utility bills come in and are processed correctly, so it's although it affects the public, we really consider that internal Function of the city.

Melissa Wissel:

But that's where I go when I need to pay my water bill.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

I don't come to you. So now that we've got a little bit of the lay of the land, let's go back. So, we've talked, like I mentioned in our intro, we've been talking with JB Miller and Barb Moore about some of those bigger funding. Want to talk about the Land Management. Program. It's a new thing for the city in the last couple of years, being very strategic and deliberate and intentional on these land and project acquisitions. Can you explain where that came from.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, so a couple of years ago we had Commission direction to establish a land conservation funding program. Now to start out, we actually use general fund reserves to kind of seed that fund. We moved a million dollars from reserves, and we committed to at least a hundred thousand dollars a year operationally to continue funding that well quickly. We had other properties that we had properties come to us. The Commission then decided to move another two million dollars out of general fund reserves, specifically for conservation projects. We then have gone after grant funding to help replenish some of that, to continue building that fund. At this moment, we have recently spent everything that's currently in the Land Conservation Fund and we will continue to put funds there operationally each year. We will continue to go after grant funds to reimburse ourselves so that we can look at properties as they become potentially available.

Melissa Wissel:

And this came out of you, and I have Talked about this a little bit. It's kind of started with Fish Island. When you talk about it, you know, we've set the money aside. But why are we doing this? And you and I, you kind of clarified for me. We came upon a project where we wanted to buy a piece of property to conserve or in this in this way of thinking and we said. Oh, we don't have that in our budget, so we needed to find that. So, in the bigger picture, what this means is we can now strategically plan on those acquisitions.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, it makes us a little more flexible if they do come up. Which is what we've seen this fiscal year.

Melissa Wissel:

And what's the process in terms of this land man this this land program that we have? What's? Why? Why do I want to sell my land to you? Or what do I have to do for this to happen? What Does this look like when you talk about like when you look at Fish Island, I think Coquina Park was maybe kind of our first that was that first deliberate choice, and we said. This is something we want to get in the business of doing. We Need to plan a little better

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, So it's really when we see a property that makes sense for the city, that if we make sure that it is really staying in a conservation. Status its staying vacant if we see a benefit to that for city residents, we're trying to be prepared so that we could. Make those purchases. If again we have a team that. looks At these. So, they have to really look and analyze each of these properties if they become available. To see if it's something that we feel like is good for the city in total.

Melissa Wissel:

And a lot of that's. It's Resilience It's land protection conservation.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, exactly.

Melissa Wissel:

I'm going to do a quick identification. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel. And I have assistant city manager Meredith Breidenstein with us in studio We're talking about the Land Management program talking about some of those projects and the resiliency. One of the other big ones was. Florida Avenue. That was a real grassroots.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

I mean, the neighbors really spoke up and we jumped in It's it's a really great program, so I guess that's kind of why I'm wanting to get your take on it of so that residents understand why we're doing this and where it kind of was born out of

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, this is very much. You're correct. This is a community driven initiative. Are between our Commissioners and our community This is why we have moved forward in the direction that we have. You mentioned some really specific ones. We also talked about Fish Island, even though that one was a state purchase. We went to Tallahassee. The community went to Tallahassee, and we told the state why we felt like it would be so beneficial. Now the city of course committed to the Land Management of. That the purchase was made by the state, but I think that is really what got the Community and our Commission realizing this. Can happen We can work on these individual parcels that we may see a benefit if we all work together.

Melissa Wissel:

The other ones. Most recently, we've been talking about tell me about the hundred acres. So, the one that was, it's what it's called but it's. Really. A hundred acres?

Meredith Breidenstein:

Correct, correct.

Melissa Wissel:

Like, where do we? A hundred acres in Saint Augustine.

Meredith Breidenstein:

And hopefully JB Miller, if we had him on, maybe he could talk a little bit more about how exactly, how much exactly.

Melissa Wissel:

Right, right.

Meredith Breidenstein:

But yes, our city Commission very recently authorized the purchase of that property along with the Avery Street property. We are using conservation funds to fund the Hundred Acre Marsh purchase and a little bit of the Avery Street, but we did have to use reserves to fund. The difference in that one

Melissa Wissel:

And that property One of those properties is over there. As you leave the peanut, you head out towards Vilano. Is that not it?

Meredith Breidenstein:

That one is technically not a conservation purchase.

Melissa Wissel:

OK, OK.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Again, we have our team analyzed. What the needs are, what these funds should be used for, and are they truly for conservation purpose? We did purchase that property as well, but that was using reserves outside of the conservation program.

Melissa Wissel:

OK. But in the spirit of saving property, it's just going to be open space. Well, we don't even know what it's going.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Correct

Melissa Wissel:

Be actually we.

Meredith Breidenstein:

At this point, at the purchase of just opens.

Melissa Wissel:

We've had. I've had people ask me what's that going to be? We don't know We just we going to save it and we're going to hold on to it and see what it see what comes of it.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Correct, from the budgetary standpoint, there is nothing in the budget

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Of course, we just use reserves to purchase it, so that'll of course have to be a conversation at a later date.

Melissa Wissel:

Got it.

Meredith Breidenstein:

But the purchase of the property is is what we're working towards at this moment and what has been authorized.

Melissa Wissel:

Excellent. Tell me about Live Wildly before we wrap up Live Wildly was is a.

Meredith Breidenstein:

OK. Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Live Wildly is a new initiative and partnership? Is that a fair way of saying that?

Meredith Breidenstein:

I think so a community partnership we have, so we have our Land Conservation Fund, we put operation funds in there and the Live Wildly who was part of sing Out Loud actually made a contribution of over eighty thousand dollars to our land conservation program. That's a pretty big deal. I mean, it's almost a full year 's worth of our what we would normally put in from our operations. Operating budget so that really does help the Community so that when these properties come online, we have more resources again more flexibility.

Melissa Wissel:

Give us a quick little synopsis. What is Live Wildly? You mentioned it has to do with sing out loud. We know it. It's something that came out of what used to be the amp, which is now the Saint Johns. Cultural I'm not a hundred percent sure of their formal name now. But it's that partnership. With the folks at the amphitheater who have a huge initiative for conservation, their green hands program.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes. So Live Wildly was a partner with the with the amp during sing out loud. And because that was held at the city we. Were a beneficiary of the funding that they got for ticket sales. Believe it was a dollar per ticket.

Melissa Wissel:

Mm.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Was contributed back to the community half of those funds went to. John's County for their conservation program and half of those funds went to the city, which again our our share. was Over eighty thousand dollars. For a budget as small as we are and a Community as small as we are, an additional eighty thousand dollars really is a nice boost and we're really grateful for that partnership.

Melissa Wissel:

And. And that money comes in. And like you just said, we've also got, excuse me, we earmark One hundred Thousand? Annually?

Meredith Breidenstein:

We have and since this program began, so we're only a couple of years in, but yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Annually. OK. So, then you add that eighty thousand and however that programming works. So, when you're buying those tickets to sing out loud, if the Live Wildly program is still in effect. I'm not a hundred percent sure about that, but it's so great to see that that community effort and collaboration.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, and that the community where this event is taking place really does see the benefit whether you go to the show or not, you are still benefiting as a community From that event happening here.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, and just and on that just a very quick aside, which really had nothing to do with us. Another thing that we saw, the community really respond to was that threat of Anastasia State Park. I mean, that was that was a huge you know... Yes, that was a totally different program. Totally different issue on the state level. But boy, did people come out and they came to us. You know, you've got to stop this and that.

Meredith Breidenstein:

It just shows the power of the community and all of these.

Melissa Wissel:

You know it.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Really, where all of this comes from.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, and we love our green space.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Is the community coming and being vocal.

Melissa Wissel:

I know between I mean all of our Commissioners, but I would say, especially Commissioner Blonder, Vice Mayor Blonder, excuse me and Commissioner DePreter, even he that you know, environmental concerns and being outdoors. We have a very forward-thinking Commission.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, we do. We're grateful for that.

Melissa Wissel:

And tell me one other thing real quick before we sign off. You were. I didn't even know this you meet. Quarterly to look at the big picture in terms of our strategic planning.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

This is something that we have to really be thinking about.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes. So quarterly, we look at the five-to-ten-year capital improvement plan on an operational level. Really how are we getting these things done. What Needs to happen in the next five years that we need to start thinking about. And planning for now. Of course, some of those are also conservation projects. But really, we're talking about the the pipes in the ground, the lift stations, the treatment plants. All of that really intensive operational structural stuff that we have that keeps the basic necessities of government going.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, I meet quarterly with with our team including Ruben including our, you know, Utilities director.

Melissa Wissel:

Stephen Slaughter.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes. So, there's a lot in, in my role. There's a lot of big picture long term planning that happens.

Melissa Wissel:

And we didn't even talk about grants, so we'll have to have you come back to talk about grants. Save that for another day. But and I imagine as we're talking also the big the other big conversation piece of course is. All of this influx of visitor and activity for nights of lights, and I'm sure that's going to come into your that'll be put on your desk. That'll be put on your desk as well.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Talked about. yes Yes, we've been talking about that. Yes, already.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, thank you so much for coming and sharing with us. Particularly this information about the Land Management Program. It's really exciting stuff and you get a front row seat at how we're doing that in the city. Yes, thank you.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Thanks for having me.

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 Saint Augustine. Join us each week as the Cities 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.