

City Manager, David Birchim, February 18, 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 Saint 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. I'm Melissa Wissel. Thanks for tuning in. We're back in studio this week to give our listeners an update on recent discussions with the City Commission about Nights of Lights. I've invited our city manager, David Birchim, to join us. He recently gave an extensive presentation. Highlighting just how successful the event has become, David may be a little too successful for our liking.

David Birchim:

Well, at least it depends on who you ask, that's for sure.

Melissa Wissel:

It depends on who you ask?

David Birchim:

We did see larger crowds this year than we'd ever seen. We saw more traffic congestion and traffic congestion. In in, in different areas that we'd never seen before. So that was part of the conversation on Monday night.

Melissa Wissel:

In different areas, it's not just the downtown Avenida Menendez. Umm. The feeder streets. Our maps get so intuitive now I think as part of it right on our mobile apps. Oh! This street is blocked, so they're going to send us somewhere else.

David Birchim:

Yep, we saw. We saw traffic backing up on all the secondary roads coming into town, even in West City and in the West Augustine in the county balance, the West Augustine neighborhoods, traffic backed all the way up to Volusia off of West King Street. We saw Masters Drive and Palmer Street inside the city backed up from people trying to cut through. From State Road sixteen, thinking that they were going to shortcut into the city.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. "I know a back road!"

David Birchim:

And that. Didn't work. We just saw a much larger volume of traffic than we'd ever seen.

Melissa Wissel:

And we try to provide shuttles. We have a shuttle service that.

David Birchim:

A free shuttle service.

Melissa Wissel:

Historically, is usually very successful. But again, even that saw some backups and some problems we. Need to address.

David Birchim:

Yeah. Our shuttle system for this Nights of Lights was successful in sheer numbers of people we moved. But the headway time was really unacceptable. The length of time it took between getting on a bus. At the county government. Parking lots and being dropped off at the VIC at some point sometimes was more than forty five minutes, and that's what an eight minute drive.

Melissa Wissel:

Right, and Broudy's. See how we had the Broudy's lot, too.

David Birchim:

Yeah. So. Those shuttle buses were also stuck in traffic and did not function efficiently.

Melissa Wissel:

We have, I think, talking about traffic. Just a reminder to folks, I know everybody. People get very frustrated. There's too many people over tourism. We have so many new residents in the county. You know, you kind of go well, that's just those folks that just moved here and said, oh, I live in Saint Augustine. I'm going to go down and see. Nights of Lights.

David Birchim:

Absolutely. Yeah for sure A big percentage of folks that were not parking. Were just local. St. Johns County residents who said, hey, it's a great night. Let's just drive through town and see the lights and got stuck in traffic.

Melissa Wissel:

Moving on to another topic, we saw another concern that we have as the city is monitoring restrooms. Solid waste keeping things clean, not just in the bathrooms, but even in the Plaza. How did that look?

David Birchim:

Well, we don't have enough. Restroom facilities to handle that many visitors. We only have sixty six public bathroom fixtures. That would be a stall. Would be a fixture. Total for the entire historic district.

Melissa Wissel:

Sixty six doesn't seem like a very big number.

David Birchim:

No, not when there's tens of thousands of people downtown. So.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah, yeah.

David Birchim:

The folks that were visiting had to find other places to use the restroom.

Melissa Wissel:

And our staff couldn't really get in to keep them clean. There was lots of crowds of people. It's tough to maneuver down there as it is just walking, much less with trash cans or trash carts.

David Birchim:

Yeah, we saw long lines coming out of our restrooms. We spent more than twice as much money on supplies for our restrooms, and we normally do. And we saw vandalism also, folks getting frustrated that they had to wait. Which is all indicative of the fact that we didn't have enough bathroom facilities.

Melissa Wissel:

Safety, I think generally it's a safe experience for people. We had a minor. I know you had mentioned during the presentation of a ring of pickpocketers. How did our police fire do public safety? That becomes a challenge.

David Birchim:

They did great. The Police Department was on a triple staff level, so normally we have nine officers downtown on a weekend night. We had twenty seven, for example, on Light-up! Night.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

And all of our officers were there. They were keeping an eye on everyone

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

They were communicating with each other, so everyone was very safe. Our fire department handled about eighty five additional calls that they would normally see in a given month. They said had a longer number of calls.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

But the most important thing from their perspective was their response time. They could not respond to calls as fast as they would like, and then the fire department has to, after they respond to a call, they have to go back to the fire department to sort of reset. And. That would normally take them about five minutes to do that, to go from the Plaza to their fire station on Malaga Street. And sometimes it took them a half an hour just to get through the crowd. So.

Melissa Wissel:

You're barely getting back and have to turn around.

David Birchim:

Right, it's the response time that was The problem

Melissa Wissel:

And one of the other topics was communications, which of course that's. Part of my job getting the message out. I. think something you led with, which I think is important, we we as the city don't sell or promote Nights of Lights from an advertising standpoint.

David Birchim:

We do not.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

That's done by the VCB, the Visitors Convention Bureau.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. But we need to get the word out about. Our shuttles Where to get transportation. So we've got a little bit of a challenge to work on. I know for me as the Communications Director. We put the message out, but in that in that moment, I think that's really what we're talking about too, is how do we instantaneously are in the moment of nights of lights on a Saturday at seven o'clock. What is the message that it needs to be? We have a smart system we're talking about bringing on board.

David Birchim:

Smart Saint Augustine is a grant funded initiative to provide dynamic message signage. Those are the signs that you would see coming off the highway. Big video messages that say garage closed. You know, take the next left for shuttles free, shuttle parking. And that Smart saint Augustine initiative also includes an app that people could. Monitor the garage closures, the parking lot closures the shuttle times on an app on their way into the event. It also allows for more coordinated changing of street lights so that Police Department can. Cycle. Traffic through an intersection more efficiently if necessary.

Melissa Wissel:

OK. And we're we're not sure of a timeline on that, but that is in the works to be rolled out.

David Birchim:

It's in design. Yeah, it's in design right now and.

Melissa Wissel:

Coming soon coming. Coming soon. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. Melissa Wissel Communications Director and I have David Burcham in studio This week He's our City Manager. Giving us an update on the presentation and feedback from Nights of Lights this year, which was almost too successful probably to our liking. David. The second-half of this conversation, of course, is. So now that we've really identified and spoken publicly about all the things that we recognize as the city of what, what's out there that needs to be addressed. What are we hearing from residents and what

are our next steps from the Commission? I know you had some requests to the Commission and they've given us. Sort of the green light, as it were, for some next steps.

David Birchim:

Sure. So the next steps really involve our next big event, which is Fourth of July. Fourth of July is on a Friday this year and it's historically a very big event for the community. And if we can take some cues from Nights of Lights and say OK, if Nights of Lights brought that many people out, we can expect a big Fourth of July event. So how do we handle it? With the resources that we have and how do we provide security and safety? For the large number of pedestrians that we're going to see downtown. Normally on a night a Fourth of July, you know, we close down the Bay front and the Bridge of Lions. So that will happen again. This time we also intend to block off Cathedral Place to vehicles. And we're going to place. We're going to put out a. Probably another hundred and twenty five to a hundred and fifty portable bathrooms.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh wow. OK.

David Birchim:

We're going to spread those out between the VIC. The Toques place parking lot, which is off of Hypolita Street. That's kind of halfway down Saint George Street. And we would like to lease or rent the Bank of America property, their parking lot on the corner of Cathedral Place and Saint. George and put about a hundred portable bathrooms there. That's where everyone is going to really be congregating while they're going down to the Bayfront to watch the fireworks.

Melissa Wissel:

Make sense, right? So that would be on the. So really addressing the bathroom issues, addressing safety and even just thinking about Fourth of July, it is a much more pedestrian experience. Maybe you don't drive around downtown to look at anything on the Fourth of July. You're going to park and come in. We do the shuttles on the island, so we'll hopefully have that shuttling. Shutting will be back as well.

David Birchim:

Just for the island.

Melissa Wissel:

And then we also ask the Commission. You've talked about a consultant as an option for getting us some support. Can you talk about that?

David Birchim:

Sure, so we recognized that not only did we recognize that we don't have the resources to manage these large crowds from a from the perspective of infrastructure. But we also don't have the experience for these large events. We've we're good at small events and we're even good at, you know, a one off concert. But we've never seen anything like this. Nights of Lights before, so we'd like to get some folks that have experience doing this.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

And get their advice. But we want to incorporate the feedback of the business community and incorporate the feedback of the residents so those two stakeholder groups, the residents and the business community will be crucial. When we engage this consultant to this will be a component of our mobility plan. How do we bring these large crowds in, manage them safely and get them out to try to safeguard the quality of life For the residents. And the quality of commerce for the businesses.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. So important such a hard balance, it is such a hard balance. Well, lots of. Lots of upcoming things to look forward to. I know we didn't really talk about either, but just a reminder to folks, we do have construction projects that. We have to take care of they're DOT projects There's things that we just, we can't help that, but it has to be done. And so we we will find a work around.

David Birchim:

Yeah. So right after the Fourth of July. DOT is going to. At some point, start the King Street Bridge replacement project and if you went out to the King Street Bridge now. What you would see is Florida Power and Light doing a directional drill, getting their power under the river in preparation of that bridge replacement project, and the city will shortly be doing their our own directional drill under the river. To put our water main under the river in anticipation of that bridge replacement project. You're already seeing construction out there now. And DOT has told us that they're not going to start their their big project until after Fourth of July.

Melissa Wissel:

After Fourth of July.

David Birchim:

But it is coming.

Melissa Wissel:

But, it's coming.

David Birchim:

And their plan is to put a temporary traffic signal at Malaga and North Ponce. Where the fire station is. So it will detour people. Over the San Sebastian Bridge, they will turn right where the fire station is, go down Malaga Street and they'll hit that light at Malaga and King and then be able to turn into downtown. It will certainly bottleneck traffic. And DOT is candidly telling us it's going to probably be two years of construction.

Melissa Wissel:

Hold on to your hats folks. Be Patient Find a way to use the 312 bridge and that's a wrap for our Nights of Lights summary.

David Birchim:

That's a wrap. Thanks.

Melissa Wissel:

That's a wrap. Thanks for coming and to all of our listeners, stay tuned in if you missed part of this broadcast, we want you to stay up on what's happening in and around the city and that you hear it here from the people who do the work to make it happen everyday Be sure to follow us on social. You can see us on Facebook, Instagram and X at CityStAug. 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 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.