

Chief Resilience Officer, Deputy Director, Public Works & Utilities, Jessica Beach, March 18, 2025

Transcript

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 to 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, thanks for tuning in. In February 2025, the city Commission passed a resolution approving the procurement of easements through negotiated conveyance which to most of us is eminent domain. And that was for flood mitigation and drainage improvement projects at Lake Maria Sanchez. It's been a year's long effort and it's a huge step in the direction of fighting flooding in Old City South. So, I've invited Jessica Beach, our Chief Resilience Officer, back to join me and explain what it all means. Welcome back. Welcome.

Jessica Beach:

Thank you, Melissa.

Melissa Wissel:

That was a mouthful! It sounds very like what was it? It was "approving the procurement of easements in negotiated conveyance." That's a nice way of saying it.

Jessica Beach:

That's the attorney language for eminent domain, yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Eminent domain. OK, so before we talk about all of that because that's so important, it's a huge win, a great, great, positive move. I do want to rewind and as you and I were talking earlier, back to 2013.

Jessica Beach:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

I think it's important every time we talk about this; you and I have talked about it. Know you've been talking with neighborhoods, but I think it's really important to go back. And catch everybody up. So, I'm going to just say go for it.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah, the history of the project.

Melissa Wissel:

Yes, history.

Jessica Beach:

It did stem from our stormwater master plan that we updated in 2013. So that looked that again. Stormwater programs at the time were really focused only on rainfall. Traditionally, what those focus on? So that master plan identified three pilot projects and Lake Maria Sanchez was actually one of the pilot projects, and so over time the city, as they got funding, we're trying to tackle the three pilot projects in the study. And Lake Maria was always on the radar, so it wasn't until Hurricane Matthew hit in 2016 that the disaster dollars became available through FEMA through their Hazard Mitigation grant program. This is actually right before I started with the city staff at that time saw an opportunity. And took

advantage of it and were able to get the project. Basically, it's at a different scale and scope that we'll talk about, but it stemmed from that stormwater master plan from 2013.

Melissa Wissel:

What are they? Can you tell me about the other two Projects are?

Jessica Beach:

yes. So, we completed Sydney Street drainage improvements that was one of them, and also the South Dixie Highway. So, we did the box culvert replacement. That was one of the first projects I also worked on with the city. So those two projects were done. Lake Maria was like the third, and then it's in the works for quite some time.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, and I guess that's why I was asking what the other two were because they were quick. In in more timeline.

Jessica Beach:

Those were straightforward type of traditional capital improvement projects. This one is. Kind of the first of its kind for the city because where I had alluded to the storm water master plans typically just look at storm water, which is rain hitting the Streets and causing flooding. So, we have actually added a coastal element component, and it's really stemmed from I think hurricanes Matthew. But even since then, so the project started evolving for that to try to tackle this coastal flood element, which is More complex, but we the city deals with compound flooding a lot. So, when we are in king tides, and it rains and then maybe.

Melissa Wissel:

This is part of that sunny day flooding. Problem?

Jessica Beach:

Yes, that's part of that coastal flooding and sunny day is like the lower-level nuisance flooding. And then you get to like, say, like a nor'easter that adds a little bit more flooding. Because the winds are pushing that tide up and into the city. And then you get, like, the hurricane level flooding. So, all those are kind of lumped into like a coastal flooding. Element and so if we add that with rainfall and this coincide at the same time the city is, you know, experiencing flooding and we've been dealing with that for the past like seven, eight years.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. Really bad.

Jessica Beach:

Exactly, so this project is trying to tackle two different types of flooding. It is very complex. The city is going to be looking to install its first storm water pump station. That's going to help manage the rainfall flooding and in the presentation that I gave to the Commission, I was recapping the public memes and the public benefits of the project.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. So, give us a little bit of that. We, I mean I want to talk still a little bit some of this history. Because we also went through a phase the tide flex valves was a big and I guess the reason I'm bringing that up is. It's a different part of this solution. But it's all out there, so I want to make sure our listeners understand. Where Lake Maria Sanchez falls in the scope of all of the flood mitigation around the city.

Jessica Beach:

So, Lake Maria Sanchez is essentially pulling all of the strategies into one project. So, tide check valves are only addressing high tide flooding. Keep That nuisance flooding out of the streets rainfall flooding is only looking at rainfall for upgrading our stormwater and drainage on that too. This is now taking all of those pieces and pulling them together in one project.

Melissa Wissel:

Can you give me a little bit of the history of why it floods down there? What? I mean, that's the whole. It's not really supposed to be filled in with dirt, right?

Jessica Beach:

If you look at the historical maps that we have all over from the on the walls and books and things like that.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah.

Jessica Beach:

It was wetland. And Bridge Street used to be a bridge. And so over time, I think Henry, Flagler, Era it got filled and manipulated. And so, the Creek itself, Maria Sanchez Creek, actually runs all the way up to Flagler College.

Melissa Wissel:

And. And it wants to keep running.

Jessica Beach:

It. So there's like that, yes.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's what we so explain that it's that street flooding that we see comes up through the.

Jessica Beach:

It's kind of like, I guess, the soils. There's still that muck soil at the bottom. The wetland the essentially, and then we've built over it on top of it. So, it's still kind of expressing itself to a certain extent. So yes.

Melissa Wissel:

And I would think too back in the day. They didn't have construction standards like we do. You're going to infiltrate it doesn't seep through the sand like I envision when you want to try to build like a sandcastle or you're trying to put a heap of sand by the by the on the edge of the beach. And that water comes up and it. Keeps. So, if you picture that on a huge scale of what Old City South is.

Jessica Beach:

Yes, yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Somebody just put in a bunch of sand and started building on it.

Jessica Beach:

It's very historical. There's a lot of, and that's not just in that location. If you look throughout the city, you'll see that evidence. But. But the IT is low lying. It's one of the lower lying areas and so that's where the flooding comes in. When we're talking about the coastal element, when that water just pushes in and through the low elevations.

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. And I have Jessica Beach with us. She is our Chief Resilience officer. Flooding expert extraordinaire, let's talk now about the project. Lake Maria Sanchez. Why Did we need eminent domain? It's been taking eight years. We had funding. There's been a plan in place.

Jessica Beach:

It's been a long journey. So, it started with funding with FEMA that actually got the design started and we started really getting into the design complexities and quickly realizing how challenging this project was going to be. So, we knew we were going to need more funding. So, we started chasing aggressively other funding sources. And as a result, at the end of the day, we have thirty million dollars in state legislative appropriations and state funding through DEP resilient Florida program to help fund design and construction for the project. So. The FEMA funding actually went away. It's another discussion, but the complexities of the project it was and actually the funding, the additional funding we got was not compatible with the FEMA funding initially because it was federal to federal, and we couldn't keep both.

Melissa Wissel:

That gets tricky.

Jessica Beach:

It gets tricky. And so, we decided to keep the larger. So, we got rid of the FEMA and so the federal funding actually prohibited us from doing any type of eminent domain at the time. So, when we laid out the design and we were doing the alignment, and the alignment is for the floodwall. That's what's really going to help with the coastal surge element and unfortunately, it's not where City owns completely. So, we were looking at the best possible alignment and that does include private properties. And so, we had started approaching property owners in that conversation and you know, fast forwarding it to today, we just haven't been successful to get Signed Easements in place and so. To be able to move the forward to move the project forward, that was kind of an option that the Commission approved. And so that's a tool in the toolbox. We still want to do voluntary work with the property owners on that.

Melissa Wissel:

Right, you always want. Yeah, you always want to see that, but.

Jessica Beach:

Yes, But we couldn't, that wasn't even an option on the table until this past year.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. So, one of the, so we've got the seawall element around the lake and that's basically you're going to go through the proper legal proceedings and get through that. Where what kind of picture can you paint for us that we could expect? Maybe just in this calendar year.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah, so there's a schedule. So, we actually the complexity of the project in many. Quick recap, we've got major stormwater upgrades. We have tide check valves. We have pump station going in and we have the floodwall. So those are the main pieces of the project because the projects been dragging out for so long, mainly because we're trying to, we're trying to build everything at once, but we realized there's pieces we can do sooner than later. So were Actually phasing the project so.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Jessica Beach:

Phase one is going to be focused around City Hall. That's going to be the major storm water upgrades that will help with the rainfall flooding, so there won't be, you know, twelve, eighteen inches of water.

Melissa Wissel:

I won't need boots in my office to get back to my car.

Jessica Beach:

You probably won't need boots in your office. I would still keep them just in case, but you will be wading through water as we have in the past, and so that'll definitely help with that, that component.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Jessica Beach:

That has a more defined project schedule. We're looking. Wrap up design for that this year and then start construction 2026/2027 for that in parallel to that the Southern section that we're calling phase two is where the flood wall is. That's a little bit of an unknown schedule. It is more complex with permitting because we are, you know, we've got wetlands, there's trees that have to be taken out. So that's going to require a lot of local, state and federal permitting. That's a longer timeline. And we, we still have a lot. Design left on that too.

Melissa Wissel:

and that's. Either the pump. That part of is that is the pump part of that phase two or is that even phase? Is there a phase three?

Jessica Beach:

Not yet. Hopefully not.

Melissa Wissel:

Knock on wood, we had knock on wood.

Jessica Beach:

Right conceptually, it's been split into two phases. The pump stations actually pretty much designed, but to construct it we would need it to go with it's kind of tied to the wall. So that would be part of the phase two.

Melissa Wissel:

OK. So, we may start, we won't. So, we probably still won't see anything visual

Jessica Beach:

Until 2026.

Melissa Wissel:

Shovel in the ground. Yet.

Jessica Beach:

Correct it would be like 2026, sometime in there

Melissa Wissel:

We've had this conversation, and I started at City Hall in 2015, and I when I first heard about this. I kept coming into work looking for Backhoes and construction vehicles, or, you know, things like that. And here we are. I think I'm at ten-year mark

Jessica Beach:

Yeah. Yeah, it's, yeah, these are long projects and its complicated and there's a lot of things to coordinate.

Melissa Wissel:

It's. Yeah.

Jessica Beach:

But there will be some movement coming. There'll be more when we have to do maintenance of traffic, and I was telling the Old City South Neighborhood Association when we get closer with. Schedule we'll. Be updating the businesses, the residents, all of that type thing.

Melissa Wissel:

Lots of door knocking and Flyers and notifications, so nothing is going to happen without anybody knowing it's coming, correct.

Jessica Beach:

Correct

Melissa Wissel:

Well, you've you have so your hand in so many resilience projects and I applaud your stick to it Ness and perseverance to stick with this project because I imagine there are some points along the. Way that giving I don't want to say giving up but just throwing up your hands. Mean what more?

Jessica Beach:

If there's been a lot of hurdles with it, I think the city 's committed to it because the in the presentation of the Commission, when you look at the maps like this is our future with flooding now today and in the future. And then if we don't do anything, if we put this project in place, we can actually address a big chunk of this flooding is causing damages to businesses and roads. There's historic structures that are at risk, so. Theres a lot at stake. I think that's why the city 's been committed to it. because we actually purchased property back in 2022 was a critical piece of the project and that kind of allowed us to keep going with the design on it. And these projects, I think this is, it's just how the how complicated it is.

Melissa Wissel:

And tell me again the cost. What's the price tag?

Jessica Beach:

Well, we have funding for thirty million. We don't have construction estimates in yet, but it'll cover a big chunk of the project. There's probably still going to be funding gaps that will have we'll know better once we get into the phase two. Where the big costs are going to be coming into play.

Melissa Wissel:

So, well, you've got your work cut out for you. Now. I am going to bring up one other thing. Congratulations. We now have a cover girl amongst us.

Jessica Beach:

I forgot about that.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah, Florida Trend magazine. You are on the cover and that was about resilience.

Jessica Beach:

Yes, it was.

Melissa Wissel:

You knew they were doing the article? But you had no idea you were going to be on the cover.

Jessica Beach:

No idea. No, that was a shock. I think I. My face turned bright red when I once I think David came into the office and said, "Look at this" Oh my gosh, but they were. They were showcasing chief resilience officers throughout the state because it was something that they were seeing more of and kind of wanted to understand better. And so. So, it was me and a number of other representatives throughout the state that they interviewed, and we talked, and they came, and they took pictures and there we go. All our projects, yeah, so.

Melissa Wissel:

Talking about all of our projects around the city and we are about out of time. So, do we have very quickly, do we have any FMA going on this year?

Jessica Beach:

We do as far as you know, we're still planning on submitting. We're hoping to hear something later this year on the fiscal year 2022, which is the big batch of properties as far as we know, the program is still happening.

Melissa Wissel:

All right. Well, keep stay tuned if you're listening for FMA, there's a whole lot of stuff going on. Chief resilience Officer Jessica Beach. Thank you. for coming in and talking about late Maria Sanchez.

Jessica Beach:

Thank you, Melissa.

Melissa Wissel:

Great update.

If you miss part of this broadcast, I want to go back and listen from the beginning. You can find us on your favorite podcasting app and all of our other episodes at CityStAugRadio.com. There's a complete listing. We want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city. Us on our social platforms to stay up to date. You'll find us on Facebook, Instagram and X at CityStAug. Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

Narrator:

You'd be 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. Another edition of The Break Room.