

The Break Room Assistant City Manager, Reuben Franklin,

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Narrator:

You've tuned in to 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'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. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the City of Saint Augustine. The conversation this week is quite literally taking place with residents and business owners to get feedback and input about public safety, traffic control, and crowd management for a large scale event, such as 4th of July and particularly, Nights of Lights. With 2 public meetings at City Hall on Tuesday and Thursday and 2 more meetings next week and one last meeting on June 10th I've invited assistant city manager Reuben Franklin to join me and give us the scoop on what can be expected welcome back Reuben.

Reuben Franklin:

Oh it's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

Big Topic we got a lot of feedback. After the great success of last year's Nights of Lights.

Reuben Franklin:

Yes, we had more people than ever. We broke a record it was the busiest Nights of Lights that we've had and I think businesses, residents, everybody saw that and and acknowledge that wow there was a lot of people that visited Saint Augustine during Nights of Lights.

Melissa Wissel:

And maybe we need to modify some of what we're working on. What we've been doing?

Reuben Franklin:

Yes, that's feedback that we've gotten and you know it happens every year when Nights of Lights comes to an end. It is a long event and so residents in the surrounding area that are impacted by it are vocal about changes they'd like to see and with this past Nights of Lights just because of the sheer amount of people we had in town. The City Commission 's asked the city manager and staff to look at options to improve the event for everybody.

Melissa Wissel:

Really improve the experience.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah exactly we're talking about improving the experience of Nights of Lights that's for our visitors and for residents. Because when it gets too crowded and congested, everything breaks down. Residents can't access their homes and their neighborhoods, but visitors aren't having a good time either because it's taking them you know over an hour to get out of the parking garage because everything 's congested or they're not even getting to their dinner reservation because they're stuck in traffic. So uh with all of that in mind umm I'm excited about these upcoming public meetings. The city manager is tasked staff, me included, we formed a traffic circulation working group to really that that's composed of people in the Police Department, the fire department, mobility, planning to sit down and start to like comprehensively look at what we think are potential solutions that will help alleviate the congestion and crowding during Nights of Lights and so that's what we're going to be bringing out the start a conversation. We want to get the public input and so that's why we have these 5 public meetings scheduled coming up. We have them geared towards residents and businesses but everybody's welcome to any of the public meetings and then we'll cap it off on Tuesday, June 10th with an evening meeting that everybody can come in if you missed one of the meetings. But the intention is really to show you what we're thinking, but also to get your new ideas and get feedback on what we're thinking you know from from

residents and businesses so we can come up with a comprehensive plan that has input and guidance from our community.

Melissa Wissel:

While we're sitting here talking I do want to let our residents know and our our listeners, I should say not just residents, but our listeners the meetings are Tuesdays and Thursday it's for these 2 weeks this week and next week 9:00 AM Tuesday is the resident meeting and there was a meeting on Tuesday the 20th so your next opportunity is going to be the 27th but businesses can join us on Thursday the 22nd and 29th. And then like you said June 10th the resident meeting is at 9:00 AM the business meeting is at 1:00 and like you said we do want folks to know they can come to any meeting just be aware that the Tuesday meeting is going to be more focused towards residents and the Thursday more towards businesses. And you've got a presentation I want to touch a little bit on some of those topics of the presentation but tell me how the format is going to go so folks realize this isn't necessarily a structured meeting they can kind of come and go.

Reuben Franklin:

Yeah it's a very open house, it's a charette, so we're going to have easels with boards displayed with some of our ideas and we'll go over the talking points of those ideas here in a second. But yeah it's going to be very open. And we're going to have city staff members of the traffic circulation working group will be there to converse and and engage in conversation to see what, for instance for residents, like what they would like to see. What their issues are and we'll have maps so they could pin down a specific spot that we could take a look at if if need be. But the idea is we found some things together but they're not solidified they're not, we're here to get your input on what you would like to see and then we're going to take all of that back and come up with a final report later you know probably in June, end of June, July sometime for the city commission.

Melissa Wissel:

I think what's important because I've said it on some of those meetings, you know we get tasked. We as staff like you said come up with a solution, but something like this we've we're realizing that we really do need the public input. So like you said there are ideas here in this presentation which is to say here's what we've come up with as a starting point. The starting point for the conversation and I think, I I always say in my job, I am I am vehemently

protective of the city and you guys are working really hard on really looking at what the problems are and traffic congestion, people, moving people, getting people to move along, it's not an easy solution. So we've come up with these ideas that's in this presentation and the conversation then is going to be so here's what we're thinking. Tell us what you're thinking, when we when we bring these folks into these meetings. If you're just now tuning in you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director and Ruben Franklin is in studio with us. We're talking about this week and next week 's public input meetings, public engagement meetings, with the community about Nights of Lights. Give us a rundown if you would of what folks can expect of what's in this presentation that that the conversation is going to be about.

Reuben Franklin:

Sure, I'd be happy to. So it it comes down to it really is a mobility issue and we have a lot of people coming into town. There's advertising going on that's outside of what the city advertises. We really just advertise our shuttling and the Light Up Night, our own event. But there's a lot of external advertising that goes on because we have a tourism economy and this is where a big part of the year where uh you know our businesses are trying to get as many people in as possible. So we have a management issue. It's really an event.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

Reuben Franklin:

It's it's a big event, Nights of Lights is a long-term event, it's 60 days 58 to 60 days long now, and so we've taken an approach of like an event management. And what do we do with the crowds and people? And so the first thing is parking and parking strategies. You would be surprised at how much parking lends to these issues of people circling around trying to find parking coming into the downtown area. There is no parking. They don't know that. They're spilling over into neighborhoods. Then they get frustrated so then they just park illegally somewhere and take a chance that they're going to get a ticket. So one of the things we're going to tackle is new parking strategies for the downtown district. That includes increasing our shuttle times that we're doing in our satellite parking areas increasing them for one month Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. To cover those really busy times but also looking at our existing parking garage and raising rates there or possibly going to a reservation only

system and that plays into how you communicate that to your visitors. And so we really want to start advertising using the satellite parking and prevent visitors from coming into the downtown. The next ticket on that on parking strategies is increasing illegal parking fines so we only have if you park illegally it's only a \$35.00 fine so we're going to propose.

Melissa Wissel:

Hey I'd rather pay \$35.00 and not have to deal with traffic right that's easy.

Reuben Franklin:

Exactly so we're going to be looking at raising the illegal parking fine so you'll see that as part of the parking strategy. Removing some on-street parking to make more room for pedestrians because we have a lot of pedestrian conflicts with vehicles. On Cathedral we're proposing to remove the on-street parking and put bicycle racks down to really create those parking spaces there will become expanded pedestrian areas. And what that will do is then we channel pedestrians to St George Street and Charlotte Street and we have controlled police officers working that intersection to keep pedestrians at bay while traffic's moving and then stop traffic and let pedestrians cross.

Melissa Wissel:

And have people darting across between parked cars.

Reuben Franklin:

Which was identified as a big part of what was backing up traffic was pedestrians were just walking out, a vehicle and get a green light, but pedestrians were just walking across the road and so then traffic wasn't able to go and then it cycles to a red light. So we've realized that we need more man-controlled intersections during this event. The next thing is is traffic circulation changes. So how can we modify the our traffic patterns in town when we get really busy? And so we'll have an easel going over that as well, so you can see what we're proposing with traffic circulation changes. Some closures of roads, you're no longer going to be able to drive down and cross St George Street on Treasury Street, so we're really looking at locking down kind of that historic district between Cordova, Cathedral, Orange and the Bayfront. Our next is, I touched base on this, but expanding our park-and-ride and shuttle service we're also looking potentially what we can do on the island side as well. The next one is a big one protect neighborhoods from cut through traffic and spill over parking.

So the way that we're proposing now is we're looking at limiting accesses off of US1 into our adjacent neighborhoods so anybody that lives in Flagler Model Land, North City I would come from the meeting and I would love to get your input and what we're thinking about. The next tier to that is, is look at doing temporary residential only parking, just for Nights of Lights, but established residential-only parking in these neighborhoods surrounding the historic district to prevent people from coming in. And then if they do park in there, they get \$100.00 you know whatever the illegal parking fine is raised to, we're thinking about \$100.00.

Melissa Wissel:

More than 35 right.

Reuben Franklin:

More more than 35. And so all those things together and the final component is public safety. Where we're really at looking at locking down St George Street for vehicle intrusion and putting up the Meridian barrier so that Vehicles cannot get onto St George Street. Basically after what we saw with New Orleans and Bourbon Street that is a core area that it has a heavy pedestrian congestion and we need to make sure that we're taking the right steps to make sure that that pedestrian mall is safe.

Melissa Wissel:

Excellent. It's a lot.

Reuben Franklin:

That was a lot yeah and we'll be there. We'll have staff there that is knowledgeable in all this so we're ready to have the conversation. Get your feedback. Get your ideas and then we'll take it all and go back and and come up with a final report based on the input that we've gotten and what the public 's, when they see what we're thinking of. And hopefully we come on the other end. My goal is that we have some consensus between the businesses and the residents. And we've got a plan to move forward and we implement it. And then it will be iterative. It's not going to solve everything.

Melissa Wissel:

We're not going to suddenly have a perfect night to life experience either.

Reuben Franklin:

But the goal is to make things better than they are. And so we'll learn from this next Nights of Lights when we implement it and we'll start to make changes as we move forward.

Melissa Wissel:

Great. And that's the goal and we've also got some other things going on that we didn't even really get to touch on. We are wrapping up some of the construction downtown, they'll be ended by Memorial Day. Fixing a little bit of that King Street bridge project that's coming, so that's also another little outlier that we haven't thought about or talked about or we are thinking about it, but that'll be something else that we have to take into account next season. But all of this sounds great. For the meeting and I hope our listeners if you're able to come whether it's a Tuesday or a Thursday or in the afternoon on Tuesday, June 10th please join us. Reuben that was a great synopsis of what we can expect.

Reuben Franklin:

Well thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

And always a pleasure to have you. You've always got lots of exciting things happening and with that we're just about out of time.

Reuben Franklin:

It always goes by so fast.

Melissa Wissel:

No but I think that gave our listeners something to really think about and look for. Go to the home page of the website CityStAug.com we will have a link to the presentation so if you

want to take a look at what Reuben was just talking about and join us for that meeting the dates are on the on the website as well. With that I guess we're done.

Reuben Franklin:

Right OK see you next time.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks. If you missed part of this broadcast and want to go back and listen from the beginning, you can check out this broadcast and past episodes on our favorite podcasting app. Spotify, apple podcast, Spreaker and more. CityStAugRadio.com is where you can find that listing we want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city. Follow us on social you'll find 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 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.