

The Break Room with Carlos Aviles, Fire Chief, September 9, 2025

Narrator:

You 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:

Thanks for tuning in you're listening to *The Break Room* I'm Melissa Wissel communications director for the City of Saint Augustine. Hurricane season started on June first and we've already seen some activity out in the Atlantic but nothing we can't handle here in Saint Augustine so with hurricane season on our minds I'm invited Saint Augustine Fire Chief Carlos Aviles back to the studio for a refresher on what we can do now to get prepared. Welcome back.

Carlos Aviles:

Thanks for having me. Tis the season to have the fire chief on The Break Room.

Melissa Wissel:

Tis the season, yes it is. You come in end of June beginning of July it's a little late this year for you normally I have you early June ish so now we're but that's OK we've had other things going on so far so good for the city of Saint Augustine. We're going to talk about sunny days and why people think ah this isn't going to hit me.

Carlos Aviles:

All right.

Melissa Wissel:

So give us the lowdown and before we get started on that I do want folks to know you as our Fire Chief become our Emergency Management Person in charge.

Carlos Aviles:

Sure. Yep so I also serve as the City's Emergency Management Coordinator.

Melissa Wissel:

That's what it is and that's when somebody says OK it's real. We kind of hand over the responsibilities and those decisions kind of come with you and our emergency operations team.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct Yep so I guess under blue skies blue sky conditions you know every on the day-to-day primarily it's just the fire department I say just the fire department. But I mean it's. It's a lot but. Yeah but so I guess during Gray skies or or periods of activation the the.org chart for the city sort of changes and so the way that I like to explain it to people is our city manager David Birchim. remains the C E O he's still the executive policy maker for the city and so then my position kind of elevates to like C O O where I'm handling a lot of the operations side of the house and but you know we're we. It's it's a system that works you know but I do a lot of the coordinating with the Saint Johns County Emergency Management group the policy group. And yeah, now is the time to get prepared.

Melissa Wissel:

And we are seasoned.

Carlos Aviles:

We are seasoned. yes we unfortunately, regrettably, have had a lot of experience with this over the past 10 years.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah. 10 years and we do operational exercises with the EOC and you did something new this year with city staff talk a little bit so our listeners understand we don't just sit around and wait for these storms to come.

Carlos Aviles:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

We are actively preparing in our own ways.

Carlos Aviles:

Yes so you know we participate in the county wide emergency operations. Hurricane training exercise annually and that's a very high 10,000 foot view of everything happening in the county. During a simulated disaster and we took the opportunity this year to take the exact same exercise except. Drill down to the street level here in Saint Augustine and so took took a little bit of coordination in order to do that but you know when we were really hyper focused on our our own emergency it allowed us a lot more time to look at things and and be more detailed. And what we might expect and how we would. Respond to that. it was also a phenomenal opportunity to get some lower management folks involved in that process for a couple of just one they could see you know what staff is doing. And in how we communicate with each other but also it really gets us all out of our individual silos of OK. You will you know utilities is doing this and solid waste is doing that and the fire department is doing this but there's all of these other simultaneous missions that are happening at the same time with planning and building and so like in in the preparedness or ramping up to an activity. Maybe planning and building isn't you know as busy while we're all running around lighting our hair on fire but then as the event progresses from a public safety perspective you know after response our mission sort of begins to throttle down so to speak while theirs is just ramping up.

Melissa Wissel:

So fast.

Carlos Aviles:

And recovery to you know you're talking months potentially depending or years depending on on the level of impact but to be able to problem solve in in real time in the same room it opened a lot of people 's eyes. I had no idea that this department was.

Melissa Wissel:

Permits.

Carols Aviles:

Building yes or what this challenge was and then we had some legislation that passed this year that put some new requirements on us and in Senate bill 180 in terms of our preparedness at at the municipal level and so.

Melissa Wissel:

We have to where we have to have.

Carlos Aviles:

Right well it's it will be mandated you know starting next year and but we've we've gone through that I feel confident that we can we can check all the boxes of you know what is what will be required of us but no it was a really great opportunity to do that and so I know Mister Birchim has asked me to.

Melissa Wissel:

Follow up yeah.

Carlos Aviles:

Yes like we're we're going to I guess continue to do this now moving forward so.

Melissa Wissel:

Well and this year. I think I was in that training and you and I go way back to Matthew and. The. The folks that are in the leadership positions and all of our directorships the directors have changed. And so we kind of have a whole some of us have been around a while a lot I think most of the directors have been in the city long enough to have been through a lot of these storms but not at that level so I think it also gave us on the director level an opportunity to really understand what each other 's jobs are in our departments jobs and how we can all help one another.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah absolutely.

Melissa Wissel:

During that and we it's funny because the other thing is people think ohh if the city shuts down everybody just goes home and there's a certain group of us that know we go to work even more so which we that's our job so.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah absolutely.

Melissa Wissel:

We're no longer all about you know water bottles and batteries either. We're we're way beyond

Carlos Aviles:

Oh yeah no. Past that yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

we're way beyond that that's you know when I was a kid it was like oh get your batteries and get your radio out so. If you're just now tuning in you're listening to *The Break Room* I'm Melissa Wissel communications director for the city of Saint Augustine with Fire Chief Carlos Aviles we're talking about hurricane season what everyone can do to get prepared some of the things to keep in mind we've got we're going to know when it's coming? And we're going to tell people and we're going to ask people sometimes mostly to evacuate and evacuation usually has to do with water.

Carlos Aviles:

Oh yes that's always water driven yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah so we when we ask you to evacuate and we're not asking you to necessarily go to Atlanta we're asking you to just get to higher ground.

Carlos Aviles:

We want you to evacuate tens of miles not hundreds of miles.

Melissa Wissel:

Right right have a friend somebody lined up that you can go see the emergency operations center will activate as you said and you want to follow sjcemergencymanagement.com is where you're going to find out the find information about all of our Emergency Management information. Anything else on hurricanes you want to mention before we get into another exciting topic which is. Following up from our Nights of Lights and 4th of July but let me make sure we covered everything before we switch subjects.

Carlos Aviles:

Sure Yep so last touch on hurricanes like it it is a good opportunity now under blue skies to make sure that you have your personal affairs in order. have a good understanding of your

insurance policy. Really know the nuts and bolts of it because your hurricane deductible is very different. And storm surge flooding is not covered under your hurricane deductible so we do encourage that everybody enroll in the national flood insurance program if you have not you know a simple thing that you could do it wouldn't take a ton of time is go through your entire house. Do a 360 you know walk around pull out your phone video everything on the exterior of your house go through every room you'll have that mean that could serve as documentation of contents things that you had in your home the condition that the home. Was in so that you need that if you haven't updated your policy in a very long time it's a it's a good opportunity to do that so and then know your zone so there is a know your zone tool if you are listening and live within the city limits of Saint Augustine you are in evacuation zone.

Melissa Wissel:

You're in the zone yes.

Carlos Aviles:

OK so it is easy the whole city is in a but if you were listening outside and you're just not sure or if you're new to the area they they do have a tool at the on the EOC website and you can go in and type in your address and it will let you know what your evacuation zone is.

Melissa Wissel:

And we're going to hold out that it's a calm season for us.

Carlos Aviles:

That's gonna be great yeah I'm all for rooting for all of this hair and dust we can get I'm good for them good with that.

Melissa Wissel:

Well switching gears thank you for all the all that good information switching gears I do want to talk a little bit about our public safety that you are you know it's police and fire are what we generally consider public safety a lot of talk after Nights of Lights a lot of talk

about. Changing some things up for 4th of July. I do want to hear from you and share with our listeners. How did things go from a perspective of what we changed over the 4th of July and one of the things was some street closures with Meridian barricades which you are now?

Carlos Aviles:

But it's an unofficial title, yes, but the city's barricades are right yes.

Melissa Wissel:

OK unofficial so it won't be in your signature OK you are the barricades are OK it's one of those other duties as assigned and now you're an expert tell us about the barricades.

Carlos Aviles:

Sure sure. Yeah so it was just something that came up and you know tragically it. Was really highlighted after the events in New Orleans over New Year's but you know we wanted to take a look at you know we have a very robust public safety plan for these large events you know that expand way beyond our capabilities at the fire department and also law enforcement because we're all calling in additional resources and extra staff but there's so many other departments that need to be involved in that planning process but one of the recommendations that came out was. Really looking at hardening. Some of the more pedestrianized areas for these large events and gatherings and so the city brought together a work group to look at it. And one of the recommendations was looking at the Meridian barricade systems law enforcement had made that recommendation we looked at it reached out to some contacts in the region actually went up to Jacksonville they have a warehouse of them got to put hands on them see how they work how did they deploy. What their use cases are for them and so the decision was made to go ahead You know implement a plan and to roll it out and so it's Nights of Lights and the 4th of July are 2 very different events and we approach them in very different ways but we wanted to get the barricades deployed really treating Saint George street like a giant pedestrian mall and and really hardening it against something like that but we wanted to leave the barricades out for the entire weekend because there's a. We want the perception of we want the public to become familiar with them and for them to be seen and so we're not trying to hide them I mean that's a deterrent and you know I think the more people see them the the better it would be and so we're we've got plans for for both Nights of Lights And 4th of July it would

will. Look. Different this year but it's all aimed at enhancing you know pedestrian safety and and public safety as a whole for folks that are coming into town.

Melissa Wissel:

Well they're more effective than a cone obviously.

Carlos Aviles:

Yes slightly more effective than a cone.

Melissa Wissel:

And there and and they're going to keep not only keeping those cars out but just like you said it gives that sense of safety we're serious this is a safe zone you can walk in and walk around here and and not be fearful of of cars coming in so we're going to see that in addition to Additional public safety other changes where we are about out of time but we're going to look for changes in Nights of Lights.

Carlos Aviles:

Yep so we'll have some changes with Nights of Lights. You know the city held several workshops that included our business community, residents, and other city employees so you know they made multiple attempts to really want to inform people receive feedback but there'll be changes to residential parking and they'll be changes to crosswalks those will.

Melissa Wissel:

It's going to be good.

Carlos Aviles:

Will be yeah the event will be great but you will notice some changes as you come through town for Nights of Lights.

Melissa Wissel:

Excellent. Well thank you for all the information on hurricane season we are going to be prepared and ready I hope not to see you in the EOC.

Carlos Aviles:

Yeah yeah. Agreed.

Melissa Wissel:

And if anything else comes up we'll have you back.

Carlos Aviles:

Sounds great thank you for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

Thanks Chief. If you missed part of this broadcast and want to go back and listen from the beginning you can find this broadcast and all of our previous broadcast at CityStAugRadio.com we want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city follow us on Facebook and Instagram at CityStAug and you can also find the fire department on Facebook and Instagram at CityStAugFire 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. Christine 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*.