

The Break Room with Jessica Beach, Chief Resilience Officer, September 16, 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:

Welcome to *The Break Room*. Thanks for tuning in. It's the rainy season and we are seeing increased frequency of afternoon showers, thunderstorms, more of those pesky king tides and add in some wind and good old-fashioned northeaster and it feels kind of like hurricane season. So here to talk about king tides, resiliency, and some recent. Federal funding coming to the city of Saint Augustine, we have Jessica beach back in studio she is the city 's chief resilience officer. Jessica, Welcome back.

Jessica Beach:

thank you Melissa thank you for having Me back.

Melissa Wissel:

You were on you're on quite the media spree this week last week.

Jessica Beach:

It's been a busy week.

Melissa Wissel:

I would honestly say I feel like maybe there's some new news folks out there it seemed very exciting and it was really business as usual for us. Give our listeners new and old or shall we say seasoned give us just a reminder of what these king tides mean it's business as usual. What do we expect?

Jessica Beach:

Yeah, this is nothing new we go through this every season in the fall about these times at this time of the year the September October November really the peaks of the the king tide season. So we just are going through that right now as far as the tides are higher than normal it's an astronomical thing it's predicted we know when these are happening the thing that's unpredictable is the winds and the rain and so when that happens and it coincides we get our compound flooding which makes things much more worse than usual and that's really what what we've been experiencing lately so.

Melissa Wissel:

And. People get very anxious?

Jessica Beach:

Yes I think there's a we got more phone calls and comments and flooding reports this time and granted it's the first official reminder of like hey this happens in the city but it was a lot of new people that were maybe moving kids into Flagler college and weren't familiar with roads being flooded and didn't know what was happening because it's not it wasn't raining at that time and so I think it's a lot of new visitors or residents of the Area.

Melissa Wissel:

and when so one of the.

Common questions I was getting from the media was well what's the city doing what are what are we doing to prevent that and some of the most simple things that we do is remind remind our residents. We also have the campaign, "don't be that guy". Can you talk about the waking?

Jessica Beach:

Yes that's big.

Melissa Wissel:

Remind our listeners.

Jessica Beach:

Yes, that's huge. That's probably the biggest complaint that we get for flooding. And it's not really flooding; it's the wake that's caused from the cars driving through the standing. water can create a lot more damage to property and it really can make things much more worse. And so we kindly remind our visitors and our residents to don't be that guy and drive very slowly if you have to go through the standing water or just turn around and try to find another route would be perfect.

Melissa Wissel:

Yes find another route. And I am going to remind folks I don't know if people realize this or not but we did pass a law that and on a designated road or a road that has been designated as such it is against the law to create a wake.

Jessica Beach:

I actually did not know that.

Melissa Wissel:

Yes and our Police Department our chief was involved with championing that legislation. If they designate a certain road and you get caught and you get a ticket it's the \$166.00 fine.

Jessica Beach:

wow

Melissa Wissel:

As of this recording, I don't know what will happen once this airs but as of this recording we did not we have not ticketed anyone but that is something that's out there so we may be reminding folks of that but yeah? Please please please try not to wake when you're driving through and to your point just see if you can't find another way that to get where you. Need to go.

Jessica Beach:

Yes for sure.

Melissa Wissel:

So talking about the resiliency tell us a little bit about some of the other things we've talked about type flex valves we have 40?

Jessica Beach:

43 installed to date.

Melissa Wissel:

OK. Tell us about those I know we haven't been installing them of late but they they do work and these type of things not going to stop a hurricane.

Jessica Beach:

Yes if that was actually our first line of defense our first project that really the city focused on from resilience perspective when I first joined the city several years ago. So it was one of the few things that you can do to try to help the high tides from backing up into the storm drain system. It's not a perfect system and we warned folks at the time and these are limited in what they can and cannot do. Because one of the trade-offs is if you put these one way valves in if it rains that rain water is going to get trapped and it takes some time for that to drain out once the tide drops and so there are trade-offs to it they can get clogged

and they cannot fully close and we can still get some flooding. But overall they are working and it's better than nothing at all in place and so we're still continuing to do that it's an ongoing effort that the city is going to continue on. But we've got so many other projects that are happening right now that most of our attention is being focused on that.

Melissa Wissel:

So that's a perfect segue we're not quite halfway through our interview but I am going to remind folks if you're just tuning in it is *The Break Room* with the city of Saint Augustine and we have Jessica Beach our chief resilience officer with us we're talking about king tides, sunny day flooding, what are we doing about it and we've got other bigger long term projects. Let's start with well you pick. Which one you want to start with? We've got the seawall

Jessica Beach:

We've got multiple seawalls.

Meliisa Wissel:

Lake Maria Sanchez Sanchez, multiple seawalls we got the bridge at King Street.

Jessica Beach:

Yes there's a lot happening.

Melissa Wissel:

Give us one let's start with one you pick.

Jessica Beach:

So we'll start maybe with the Bayfront and the sea walls because those are the most visible and those are really going to be starting construction very soon. We have one section of seawall at the Marina that we have FEMA funding for we actually just got the bids back this

week and so we hope to be awarding a contract soon actually go in and basically raise the last low section of seawall and close that elevation gap. So there's consistent elevations and protection along that side and then. Or like next year a little after nights of lights the Department of Transportation and the National Park Service around the same time are going to be starting construction for their seawall projects along the Bayfront and they are also raising in rehabilitating sea walls so those are some big projects that will I think really help the city.

Melissa Wissel:

And that let's talk about that when I don't think the. The one that you were talking about first the Marina is is it from the the gangway at the. Marina to the new construction of the building or is it the bridge.

Jessica Beach:

No it doesn't go quite that far north because that's already pretty high elevation and actually the D.O.T. project is going to be reworking some of that on the very close edge by the Bridge of Lions. This is closer to the Marina, it's South of the South dock. And when you walk down there it just drops an elevation that sidewalks we're going to be replacing that that sea wall section and and elevating it so it matches so it's in that one little segment it's not a very large project but it will definitely help.

Melissa Wissel:

And then the north part that's going to be most visible that people probably are not really paying close attention to but when that starts to come in and it's finished that's going to be a very different view shed, tell us about that.

Jessica Beach:

Yes they have done some really nice renderings and some video to help basically show what that's going to look like but. The D.O.T. will be going in and raising and rehabilitating the existing Bayfront area so they're actually it's going to look very different it's going to function I think better too from a safety standpoint we won't have just like. The chain and the ballards where you can just like fall. Off the wall into the water.

Melissa Wissel:

I'm surprised we don't have more people that fall in the water I don't even know that we really have people fall in the water but

Jessica Beach:

Fortunately, I don't think so but they're going to be replacing that with a solid wall, it's going to match the design that we already have but near the Marina and the original project that we did. Back in 2013 that it went through our historic architectural review board and so it's kind of like a pre-approved design the way it looks and so it's going to basically look like that. But it will change how we are used to seeing that Bayfront with it, but it is going to provide a lot higher flood protection that's going at least I think to 8 and a half feet. I think right now it's like around 5 and a half 6 so it's going to help with that wave action and overtopping and hopefully prevent that.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's going to be from the Bridge of Lions to the Fort.

Jessica Beach:

Yes

Melissa Wissel:

So what folks need to realize they don't think we're going to see any road disruption.

Jessica Beach:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

so it's going to be on the sidewalk.

Jessica Beach:

It's mainly right. That's correct.

Melissa Wissel:

But it will change the view When you're driving down the down the Bayfront after all is said and done you're probably only going to see the tops of the masts you're not going to see the hulls of the boats

Jessica Beach:

No I don't think so

Melissa Wissel:

sitting in the water anymore..

Jessica Beach:

There's some renderings out there that kind of show it you can still see like looking out and whatnot but it's it'll it'll be a little bit different but it's trade-offs

Melissa Wissel:

It's safer.

Jessica Beach:

And it's safer so I think for us like the flooding it's we have to do something.

Melissa Wissel:

That's huge. Yeah OK and so then let's also talk about the bridge at King Street that's kind of our next big visible

Jessica Beach:

Definitely most impactful.

Melissa Wissel:

The most impactful.

Jessica Beach:

That's Department of Transportation as well they had a recent public meeting to go over schedule and kind of the what to expect. And so they are raising that bridge it's very low we actually had flooding there with this king tide nor'easter system, so that will hopefully be eliminated at least based on the design and what they're proposing. So that bridge replacement is supposed to start after Nights of Lights is my understanding. And then the big thing is that that bridge is going to be that is shut down completely so people have to be rerouted. Traffic on Malaga, they're installing a temporary traffic light I believe so that will be an adjustment and so we will have a lot of construction happening all around the same time in the downtown area.

Melissa Wissel:

Fantastic.

Jessica Beach:

But then all the improvements will be done and we'll forget about it and we'll be in a much better place later.

Melissa Wissel:

It's going to be a beautiful when that when that whole corridor from US one down to the Bayfront is finished

Jessica Beach:

yes.

Melissa Wissel:

That's done we're going to do the

Jessica Beach:

There's the King Street drainage improvement project. That's separate. There's Lake Maria Sanchez that ties into that as well so there's a lot that's going to be happening right in the main corridors if you will around the city.

Melissa Wissel:

A lot happening. So be patient with us

Jessica Beach:

Yes please.

Melissa Wissel:

And know that it's all for a better outcome at the end so before we wrap up, I do want you to share with our listeners. Big, it was a big announcement, and I don't know that I think even I wouldn't say the Commission was surprised, but it was a little bit of like an oh wow and we wanted to have a shout out to our Representative Congressman Rutherford up in DC tell us about that, that's big.

Jessica Beach:

Yes yes so we took the Commission on Monday night on September the 8th I believe was the date. We took an agreement; it was actually our First Amendment to our feasibility cost share agreement with the Army Corps of engineers for our Back Bay Study that's been happening over the past few years. So we actually are having a fully funded study which is huge news. The federal government was able to add I think it was a little over 4.3 million dollars to this study and that basically makes it fully funded meaning the city does not have to contribute any additional funds we've already paid our share up to this point and we were planning for our future if we were going to have to contribute additional funds for this study and that is basically an a gift. A little over 2,000,000. in savings for the city itself and the Army Corps there they'll be managing the rest of the the study from here on out and they've been doing a great job lots of public support and comment period and public meetings like there's a lot that's happened but there's going to be more to come but definitely a huge thank you to Congressman Rutherford and his office to be able to make that happen.

Melissa Wissel:

And the study, just for those who are not aware of. You know we do mobility studies, we do transportation studies. What is the study and why is it so important? And tell us about the potential solutions.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah so this study we gave a quick overview to the Commission kind of where we were at with everything. The study kicked off officially in 2023 so it's a 6-year \$7,000,000.00 well over \$7,000,000.00 study and it's to look at comprehensive coastal storm risk reduction for the entire city not just one neighborhood not just the downtown. We made a decision early on just to look at everything within city limits and so that added time and money to the study but I think it's prudent for us to look at all the alternatives and so they are looking at final array of alternatives and looking at what options we are going to become viable for us since we're gonna have more to unveil. But just high level we're looking at flood walls horizontal levees natural nature based features and things along that lines that will help us mitigate the flooding in the city long term.

Melissa Wissel:

No gates?

Jessica Beach:

We did look at gates and we carried it through just to see costs and really feasibility but it's so cost prohibitive we just it we would need multiple of them and it's a much larger project for just the city to take on. That's much more regional type of approach so not for the city on we're going to be focusing on more city what we can do.

Melissa Wissel:

And the study just for those tuning in this study was basically to look at how can we mitigate storm surge. Not necessarily the hurricanes?

Jessica Beach:

Yes yes it actually does include hurricanes it's not like there's actually a suite of storms that they look at even the big ones are included in that but what they try to do is find that balance of cost benefit so the damages that happen from a storm that cost offset that there's like a sweet spot and that's kind of what they're trying to narrow in on to see what type of protection we can provide that's real. And just a just a quick reminder for the listeners we did a future without project meaning baseline do nothing over the next 50 years you're looking at 4 to 5 billion dollars of damages if we do nothing so there's a lot at stake that we need to be thinking about.

Melissa Wissel:

Kind of being underwater basically.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah, basically.

Melissa Wissel:

I mean sea level rise is real.

Jessica Beach:

And that's been factored into the calculations and the modeling and stuff like.

Melissa Wissel:

So so this does not mean we're going to build a wall around Davis Shores or it might?

Jessica Beach:

It it just it could. It just depends on the alternatives.

Melissa Wissel:

But but it's that vision it's that what are we going to do and it takes time.

Jessica Beach:

Correct

Melissa Wissel:

yes. So you'll let us know.

Jessica Beach:

I'll have more to share soon.

Melissa Wissel:

OK well we're out of time. As always great to have you thanks for the update on the king tides. Don't drive fast through the water, don't be that guy and keep an eye on the weather. We didn't even talk about the Marina.

Jessica Beach:

Water level sensor yes.

Melissa Wissel:

So I'll give a quick one so I wrote it down go to the municipal Marina website click on what about in the top menu bar go to Marina and Local weather and there's a link to a beta testing water level gauge and we'll just have to have you come back and talk about it next time.

Jessica Beach:

Yes and we'll probably push more about that out when we're ready to fully

Melissa Wissel:

It's not official but it's out there you can test it

Jessica Beach:

That's correct yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

OK well thanks for coming in.

Jessica Beach:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

OK if you missed any part of this episode and want to go back and listen from the beginning you can find us on your favorite podcasting apps there's a complete listing

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Narrator:

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