

The Break Room with Meredith Breidenstein, Assistant City Manager, September 30, 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. If you live in Saint Augustine or Saint Johns County and whether you've been here a month, a year, or even 10 years you've probably heard about this little event we have here called Nights of Lights. Last year was unprecedented for the City of Saint Augustine. We had people, cars, crowds, traffic and so this year we've asked for some additional funding support from the Tourist Development Council and that request was met with a financial commitment from our board of county commissioners for roughly \$851,000. Here in studio this week I have assistant city manager Meredith Breidenstein to give us a breakdown of just where that money can be spent and what this means to taxpayers. Meredith, welcome back.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Thank you for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

It's a lot of information I think that kind of sums it up.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes

Melissa Wissel:

And you have been championing this lift for the city. Helping understand what it is that we need, why we need it, how it gets spent. I want to thank you for coming because this is not an easy topic for the general public, let's say we want to clarify some things.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

So give us maybe just a little bit of background on how we got here what's it like for the city in terms of what we've done in the past for Nights of Lights, the cost that we have we've. Already we've been asking the county for money but we're asking for a significant amount more this year.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes. That's correct so the city has been producing nights of lights for 30 years.

Melissa Wissel:

33.

Meredith Breidenstein:

33 years. And the city has done a fabulous job with that over the years and Nights of Lights really includes things like making sure that we have public safety, mostly public safety, always the most important thing especially as we have larger than normal crowds on St. George Street and throughout all of our intersections, both pedestrian and vehicular. The city also pays for all the lights that you see in the Plaza, in front of City Hall or what makes Nights of Lights what it is. The beautiful setup that the city staff are responsible for putting up as well as the other décor. Wreaths on the lamps, on the light posts, the Christmas tree and the Plaza everything that people see when they come here. All of that is from the City. Now over the years as crowds have increased the city has added shuttling to Nights of

Lights. We have been doing that for years now. We have in the past only shuttled for approximately 12 days. Those shuttling costs as well as some of the costs for lighting and decor we have asked the tourism development council for funds for that, bed tax dollars, and they have allowed dollars for shuttling and for lighting and decor. After last year's event we saw a significant increase in the number of people that were here of course that caused issues that we were simply not prepared for. More people means more staff are needed we also saw that we had a deficiency in public restrooms when we have such a large amount of people that come. So after listening to the community to the business owners and having several public meetings the city came up with a plan on how to handle the future Nights of Lights. This included, of course, an increase in spending. Our proposal was to increase the number of shuttle days from 12 to 35, to add public restrooms for the busiest time, that specially that heaviest 2 weeks between Christmas and New Year's. All of these things are increased costs and so we did go to the tourism development council with our plan and we had an increase in our request. In the past yes in this past we have received \$200,000.00 to help offset shuttle cost and lighting cost. This year we asked for \$1.2 million in order to offset all this increase that we described in our plan. After a lot of conversation and a lot of discussion and looking at how tourism development tax dollars can be used again this year the bed tax is not ad valorem taxes. The city Commission, I'm sorry the county Commission, granted about \$851,000 to be used to help with the new Nights of Lights plan. We'll use these funds for our shuttling and for lighting the city will still be responsible for the cost of increased public safety and for restrooms again we have public restrooms year long but during this time you will need more. So we have a plan to bring 50 portable restrooms in for that heaviest 2 week time period of the season.

Melissa Wissel:

So I want to go back a little bit when you talk about the 12 days versus 35.

Meredith Breidenstein:

yes

Melissa Wissel:

so remind all of what what is the 12 days 12 days of Christmas that's not 12 days of Christmas. But it was just a limited, it was just sort of oh we're going to have a shuttle on Saturdays

Meredith Breidenstein:

shuttle on Saturdays and a shuttle during some of the peak days during that 2 week period. Now our proposal is to shuttle every Friday, Saturday, Sunday of the entire season and even more days within that heaviest time period for a total 35.

Melissa Wissel:

So we're really going from pretty much we could call it. Thanksgiving weekend, Saturdays in December only to the weekend before, which is Light Up Night, Thanksgiving the week before Thanksgiving the week in Christmas every Friday Saturday and Sunday yes so 3 days on the weekends not just the one that gets that adds up yes that's a lot.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes that's the biggest expense. We were asking for tourism dollars.

Melissa Wissel:

Then the bathrooms we did a little pilot study

Meredith Breidenstein:

yes

Melissa Wissel:

at 4th of July so we figured out OK we don't need that many.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Correct we were able to work with the. With the church and the what's known as the Bank of America parking lot right there on Cathedral we rented that out for 4th of July and we filled it with portable restrooms to see, does it work? How many can we put in there? Do the

logistics work and they did, however, we realized maybe we don't need quite that many so our initial request was for 116 public restrooms. And additional public restrooms throughout the busy season and because of the reduction in. Funding and our analysis of what the real need is, we feel like from that the cost standpoint and a need standpoint 50 additional restrooms is reasonable and will still make a big difference.

Melissa Wissel:

Or do you know yet where we're putting them or are we putting them back there are we trying to find?.

Meredith Breidenstein:

We are still working through the details of that and and contract there but not the full parking lot but yes that still seems to be a good location right there by the Plaza. Easy for people to get to, kind of spread out from the public restrooms at the Visitor Information Center, our public restrooms on Hypolita in Saint George. And then we go a little bit towards the end of Saint George and we're there at that parking lot so we feel. Like it's a good spacing of public restroom facilities.

Melissa Wissel:

And 4th of July predominantly people were. Over by the fort and on the bayfront but this you're definitely going to have that concentration of people in the Plaza walking under the trees.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes so in addition to 50 restrooms we feel like is a big improvement to where we have been in any past season.

Melissa Wissel:

almost twice as many as we have.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

I think there's 60 something 62. I'm not sure. 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 Meredith Breitenstein with me in studio this week. She is our assistant city manager she keeps us straight when it comes to our spending and we're talking about Nights of Lights. One of the other things we've been talking about is you mentioned the TDT or the TDC funding that we're getting from the county. Let's also address and clarify where does this money come from. People seem to think that the city is wasting taxpayer dollars or we're spending we're spending all this money so I want to make sure that we're we're here to answer people's questions we're here to clarify what's confusing about where the money comes from.

Meredith Breidenstein:

yes so our request to the tourism development council was for tourism development tax dollars which are otherwise known as bed tax dollars so. When visitors come here or anyone stays in a hotel for example. Here in the city, in the county, tourism development tax dollars are generated called bed taxes those go to the county and then the city can request the use of those funds for things that are eligible. There are guidelines on what those funds can be spent on and there was a lot of good conversation between city staff between. County staff to make sure that our requests were truly eligible to use those funds and again there are tourism dollars to be used to support tourism items. So the dollars that we've asked for are not ad valorem property tax dollars.

Melissa Wissel:

And you mentioned the magic word of eligible can we talk about eligible what is eligible what isn't eligible because we want to make sure we're spending it appropriately and and we want, the county wants to make sure we're spending it appropriately what is that eligibility is and isn't.

Meredith Breidenstein:

So with this request that we had, we requested funds for many things and the ones that were determined eligible were for shuttling which is moving the visitor to the event essentially. And also for the event itself when it comes to the lighting when it comes to the decor when it comes to Light Up Night and the the production that is Light Up Night for the visitor and resident, but it is for the event. Those are what funds can be used for it was determined they could not be used for restrooms. And also they cannot be used for public safety so those are the things that the city will continue to fund on its own at a higher slightly higher level this year where those have always been funded by the city.

Melissa Wissel:

And we're increasing that.

Meredith Breidenstein:

yes

Melissa Wissel:

we've got we've got participation from sheriff's office.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes, we are increasing our public safety budget this year to have you know we're working with the Sheriff's Office, we always work with the Sheriff's Office, this year even more so. We're also using barricades at certain intersections we have tried those out. We've borrowed those from other agencies in the past our plan is to purchase those. To really improve public safety that's what it's all about.

Melissa Wissel:

and the and the barricades you mentioned we're borrowin,g purchase, and working on purchasing. We can use those throughout the year we use them 4th of July those were a borrow?

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes. Yes. They were for 4th of July, they were for this past Sing Out Loud. We have borrowed them but that's tricky because you have to they have to be available and we have found that with the length of the event of Nights of Lights we really needed to. Own those so we have budgeted in our regular city budget to purchase the barricades so that we always have them for any event that the City may do.

Melissa Wissel:

was there I'm going to put you on the spot on this one we had talked about a grant or something yes OK so you can get assistance.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes so we need. We have budgeted for these we also learned about a grant very late in our budget process so we are. Of course always going to go after a grant if we're eligible for that hopefully that will offset the the dollars that we have to spend on those.

Melissa Wissel:

That would be wonderful we are really good at getting grants that's one thing.

Meredith Breidenstein:

Yes we have a great team working on that.

Melissa Wissel:

We have a great team. if you missed part of this broadcast and want to go back and listen from the beginning you can find us on your favorite podcast app look for us on Spotify, apple podcast, iHeartRadio, speaker and more. You can find that listing of this broadcast and past episodes at citystaugradio.com. We want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city and that you hear it. Hear from the people doing the work

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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*.