The Break Room with Jessica Beach, Chief Resilience Officer, October 14, 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* and again thanks for tuning in. With a few king tide cycles behind us and still a few more to come this year I wanted to invite back to the studio Jessica Beach, Chief Resilience Officer for the City of Saint Augustine to give us an update on how the localized flooding has been impacting us, tell us about this cool new tool that we have that you can use, too. And if we get enough time we're going to talk about some of the upcoming major construction projects. We're talking years, that are going to help with some of these, mitigating some of these factors, but we may not get to that, so,. Jessica welcome back.

Jessica Beach:

Thank you, Melissa. There's always plenty to talk about this time of year.

Melissa Wissel:

Lots and we can always have you back again to talk about the projects and like I mentioned in the intro. Those are a ways away, but let's talk about what we're dealing with right now. You came to talk to us couple weeks ago, about a month now, we were talking about projecting these king tides. And we talked and you said boy we've got a lot of feedback and I said let's just talk let's get you back on The Break Room.

Jessica Beach:

And it's trying to reach an audience versus one by one by one the emails it's trying to explain it it's like the same messaging and I think a lot of us have forgotten about the tides and the king tides in some ways because we've been very successful in Retrofitting tie check valves. Those were working great the first few years now we're getting into the maintenance phase of those we're seeing issues and we're troubleshooting and I think trying to manage the expectations of what that can and cannot do so that's some of the feedback that we were getting and we're hoping to really explain that to our residents because this is the time of year where we know it's predicted tides. This is not like a surprise. But getting ready for especially wind and that's what happened in September we have some really strong winds multiple days and we had tides that were high, but they were not as high as as October month. But the wind was making it a lot of flooding and I think it caught a lot of people by surprise because we've been comfortable with installing valves and we've really been able to reduce and mitigate a lot of flooding that we've seen particularly for the nuisance flooding, but they're not perfect. We did try to message that when we first did this several years ago. We got grant funding. We were aggressive, we went in and we retrofitted these. Now we're kind of seeing a few years later, those effects on the system. It’s a much larger complicated as many things are within the city. When you’re trying to fix these challenges so. Our stormwater operations they have been so busy responding not only to the complaints that we've been getting and trying to troubleshoot but just for routine maintenance and that's a big question that we got from the public that I wanted to rest assured they knew all the hot spots are when it rains when it's high tide all of the things and so they're on top of it and they are doing routine inspections and maintenance and they're, they're on it.

Melissa Wissel:

Residents are?

Jessica Beach:

Our storm water operations.

Melissa Wissel:

OK gotcha.

Jessica Beach:

Correct just trying to help with a lot of questions we were getting from our community was “are we doing maintenance because it's not working” and it's like yes, and but they're seeing issues and so now we're in that phase of troubleshooting it may require valve replacement. It may require repairs of pipe. Storm pipe that triggers costs and this is a whole another type of phase that we're. In with that so.

Melissa Wissel:

It's like when you get you get a new toy. At your house like oh. I'm so excited oh I didn't. Think about that.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah, a new car is great and then you have maintenance a few.

Years into it. That's exactly what this is like. It's the maintenance part of that.

Melissa Wissel:

The one of the things you've talked about in this conversation of maintenance that you know I've had is also the build up of.

Jessica Beach:

All things.

Melissa Wissel:

Urchins, Sea creatures, barnacles, oysters things that attach itself.

Jessica Beach:

That’s probably the biggest challenge that our operations face and they're touching it they're cleaning it but as soon they clean it a month later there's already starting to have that recolonization. They’re trying to stay ahead of it and that's where they're struggling because they can only touch this at low tide, and the tide has to be low at a certain level during working hours. Like during the day, where they can actually see and fix and do the things on that too so we've eliminated window when we can get in and do the maintenance but they are on it I just want to emphasize that that they they're aware of it it's not like for lack of maintenance. They’re trying to very aggressive with it.

Melissa Wissel:

And like you said, there's only a certain window of time, window of opportunity, limited people, limited time. One thing I do want to ask you to do is explain a tide valve, a tide check,a tide check valve. Explain that to our listeners, those who know, can check if you know. And those who are new are saying what are you guys talking about.

Jessica Beach:

What is this? It's probably a good place to start because I think those that were aware of when we did these and saw the initial effects like hey this is great, they still don't fully understand how those work and so just to clarify the way the city has installed it. It's not done the same way throughout the state. But the way we've chosen to install it at the end of the storm pipe, this is where all the rainwater drains out and it's basically where it interfaces with the Matanzas River in many cases. So we're putting in a one way valve at the end of that pipe and that keeps the tide, the Matanzas River from backing up into the pipe that floods through the inlets in the street so we put in a physical thing.

Melissa Wissel:

Like a flapper? Closes against the tide against the water.

Jessica Beach:

Yes it's these it basically stays in a closed position and it's when you get a lot of rain which is in the pipe itself it pushes open the valve and lets the water, the rainwater, drain out. But it closes immediately. So it keeps the high tide from backing up. So we had a great video

when we first pushed this out it may be worth us reposting this reminder on that too, how these work.

Melissa Wissel:

And I'll put that down note to self so be on the lookout for more social media messaging. so, get Rachel on that.

Jessica Beach:

I think the the confusing part is where are these, and it kind of just under they're seeing water in the inlets, well we also had a lot of rain and so you have rain trapped which is what we might be seeing it may not be high tide flooding and then on top of that we have really old infrastructure so if it's a high tide it's seeping through the soils it’s seeping through the walls. It's going around any valves. The water is finding its way and I think that's what we're seeing more of now because now we've put these devices in. It does put strain on our infrastructure and so now I think we're starting to see the effects of that a little bit. But they still work, because our operations guys have done a great job. They've checked all the trouble spots that have been reported for flooding the last tide cycle that we had, the substantial king tides. And all the valves are working, but it's like when it rains, the debris, the leaf litter, the cans, the stuff that goes down the drain that people aren't supposed to be putting down the drain or it just ends up down there those are also clogging the valves and they can't close all the way, so there there's a lot of things happening.

Melissa Wissel:

A lot of things and so for those of us who maybe live in a neighborhood so you'd see these along the sea wall from the water.

Jessica Beach:

Correct you would not see them from the road.

Melissa Wissel:

So, if you're one of these people who kayaks or you're curious and you get yourself onto the water and you see it and you think, “Oh I should have propped that open.” Again that's not helping.

Jessica Beach:

That's correct. That's a misconception. We’ve had some questions about that, I'm glad you brought that up. Because I think they're trying to help like, oh, the pipes blocked. Why is this blocked? We need to open it, we need to let that water out.” But then they’re inadvertently letting the water back in so. They're there for a reason. They’re designed for a reason, so you know let us do the maintenance on it. Don’t touch it.

Melissa Wissel:

But we can, people can send in an e-mail to report flooding. We have a button for that, I believe in the king tides pages.

Jessica Beach:

Yes we do and we've got it multiple places on the website but it is something that people use and we appreciate the photos because that helps us to track and troubleshoot and I would also say to the community we have some very you know wonderful neighborhoods that are very involved and they report it they kind of want to help us troubleshoot it but it's like I would come to mind that you know we have all the data we've got the information. We can't typically share our GIS or infrastructure that's a security risk. So we just ask people send it to us and let us figure it out.

Melissa Wissel:

The we have two web addresses I want to share before we start talking about the cool tool that we have. CityStAug.com/kingtide. We do have it posted when the king tides are. We're going to update that so that we have the most current upcoming king tides. We also have another page that we're going to talk about citystaug.com/floodingresources. And we're going to put a link to our new Hohonu.

Jessica Beach:

that's correct

Melissa Wissel:

Tide gauge, water gauge. So, I'm bringing it up today because you approached me and said word is getting out, people asking questions. We've got a few minutes left. It’s important for us to at least just touch on this and we may have you back again to talk about it in depth if we run out, but the Hohonu sensor. Give us a rundown what is it? How do I as a resident register and what does it tell me?

Jessica Beach:

And so we're very very excited to have it. It became available to us through the smart Saint Augustine grant program so more coming, but we got one to kind of pilot. We installed it at the Marina and it's not exactly next to the WeatherSTEM station, but it's very close. So now we have real time rainfall, wind, and then water levels. And that's been very helpful for the city, like our staff to see predicted versus observed water levels because we know anecdotally wind creates more

Melissa Wissel:

surge

Jessica Beach:

yes it adds add height to the add adds height for the tides and we just didn't know how much we kind of rules of thumb so this really helps us pinpoint it which helps us to translate it into which streets are really going to be impacted.So people can sign up for a free account through the dashboard if they want to sign up to get the text alerts I should clarify. The dashboard anybody can view and there's lots of other sensors in the area not just ours but that's the most relevant and so they can sign up for text alerts for when king tides are coming. And for we have some thresholds set in the dashboard and it's more for when we could potentially expect street flooding so those are the other alerts that you can sign up for.

Melissa Wissel:

And we want to be careful of alert fatigue yes I signed up for Saint John's alerts which tells me about all the really nasty weather and every now and again I'm like OK OK I got it. But. We want to remind folks that when you sign up for these alerts. Could you be a little bit inundated?

Jessica Beach:

Depending the way it works is if it hits the thresholds that we flagged you're going to get a text alert about that and so depending on if we have a lot of wind and like this time in season you're going to get more text alerts than normal but it was not throughout the year though it's really when it hits that threshold level. Well that the sensor is like hey guess what you're your advisory level and you get a text alert about it there's more I think it'd be helpful for residents because we kind of know streets may be flooding but. It's more for the operational side of the city I think.

Melissa Wissel:

And the sensor that you're talking about with the flooding the king tides tell us about that because that's different than the other one you just mentioned this is the king tides or is it the threshold the king tides is a little different.

Jessica Beach:

It's a different alert but it's the same system, same dashboard and so Hohonu which means deep or deep water they've been great to work with they actually calculate predict out. There's science behind it where even the king tides are going to happen each month so you can sign for text alert just to know hey and these dates of this month are king tides and so that I think is helpful for the community. The second option is the water level advisory thresholds and that's probably more for knowing when potentially roads are going to flood. I think if you're in a really low neighborhood and you know your roads flood that might be more relevant. As we get more of these sensors on you can actually sign up for specific sensors so if we get them throughout different neighborhoods or different areas of the city you can focus on your your dashboard your sensor.

Melissa Wissel:

Your street. For your right your your neighborhood so. Let's just say hypothetically. So we've got one installed it's part of the Smart St. Augustine which was really a comprehensive plan for and I didn't realize that it was part of Smart St. Augustine So what you're suggesting is. Perhaps Davis Shores would have one, Flagler Model Land might have one, old city and it's not just because of those neighborhood associations I'm just using that as a geographic reference.

Jessica Beach:

Correct.

Melissa Wissel:

So for now if I sign up for it and let's say I do live in Davis Shores keep in mind the sensor is at the Bayfront.

Jessica Beach:

At the Marina. Correct yes.

Melissa Wissel:

And is any kind of indicator I guess my question is if I sign up for I've got to keep in mind that it's an indicator at the Bayfront right so there could be some type of a lag.

Jessica Beach:

The differences that's exactly right. And that's what we're you know trying to caution people on is that just because it hits the the trigger that doesn't mean your streets going to flood yet, but it might be coming it just depends on a lot of factors and I think that's the advantage of eventually through the smart Saint Augustine grant program and they deploy more more of these that will help kind of refine that but right now it's at the marinas it's just the caveat.

Melissa Wissel:

OK and again it's a tool to arm our residents we do have all kinds of flooding information, resources, links to other sources on the flooding resources page CitySTAug.com/floodingresources. Sign up for it but like Jessica said just be cautious in your expectation. Get familiar with what it's really telling you maybe is is is what we're thinking about.

Jessica Beach:

Yeah. Exactly.

Melissa Wissel:

Anything else the Hohonu, we're going to wait to see what happens with getting more sensors I think we're out of time.

Jessica Beach:

That went so fast.

Melissa Wissel:

So if we get some more feedback or we feel like we need to come back to talk more about the Hohonu we will. We did not talk about some of those upcoming construction projects so you're on the hook to come back.

Jessica Beach:

That's OK they're coming but not immediately yet.

Melissa Wissel:

Maybe after Nights of Lights.

Jessica Beach:

That's probably good timing.

Melissa Wissel:

I'll have something new to talk about yeah well thanks for coming Jessica it's always great to have you and great information and great tips for our residents.

Jessica Beach:

Thanks.

Melissa Wissel:

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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 St. 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*.