

The Break Room with David Birchim, City Manager,

November 18, 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 been 9 months since our last conversation with city manager David Birchim and he's back in studio this week with a real time update on all of the changes the city has made for this year's nights of lights. David, welcome back.

David Birchim:

thank you

Melissa Wissel:

I know it feels like this is all we've been talking about this year. Light-Up! Night was last weekend lots of changes to our operations how we're looking so far? What are we doing?

David Birchim:

Everything looks really good so far and everything looks great. Light up night was great. uh no problems uh everyone seemed to have a wonderful time and the lights came on which was very important.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's all we care about on Light-Up Night.

David Birchim:

Pretty much.

Melissa Wissel:

Bathrooms be darned we want lights to come on.

David Birchim:

The lights came on.

Melissa Wissel:

So let's start with that Speaking of bathrooms tell we we've been talking about this all year so you and I can just go through this checklist but let's let's start with bathrooms.

David Birchim:

OK let's start with bathrooms city only has 66 permanent fixtures in downtown bathroom fixtures that is. And last year we we quickly realized that was not nearly enough so we have more than doubled the number of bathrooms in downtown and we have put them in a variety of different locations downtown so if you're walking from the parking garage to the Plaza. You will come. Upon the public restrooms along your way and we've got them on the side streets we've got them at the corner of cathedral place and Saint George, the Bank of America parking lot. And we will also have them out along the Bayfront during the regatta. And so they have been well received and we've also got them around the Government House the governor 's house. So far so. Good.

Melissa Wissel:

So far so good with bathrooms. I will say I was walking back to City Hall and realized you know I might need to make a quick stop and I. Did use one? That's where they were very conveniently located. Clean, it was 7:00 o'clock at night ish very clean still so by all accounts at least from my own personal experience they they're looking good.

David Birchim:

Yeah we've got some help making sure the restrooms are cleaned and litter is picked up we've got a private service that we've hired to help our solid waste folks make sure that there's no trash in the streets and they're doing a great job.

Melissa Wissel:

The I did notice one other thing there are there were barricades so for anybody listening and you're thinking they're porta potties along cathedral they are behind some of those barricades so there's a safety barrier. But we're also. Using the what we we refer to as the bike rack barricades for pedestrian management talk about how we're using those how did that work on Light up night. We're going to see him throughout the season.

David Birchim:

Yeah those are the metal that look like bike racks and you may have seen them on the Fort green when there have been public events on the Fort Fort Green and we really use those in the parallel parking spaces on Cathedral Place to prevent people from walking across the street and in an unsafe manner. So we've we've expanded the pedestrian areas And we have provided clear places for people to cross the street. What we saw last year was people walking in between cars and through through traffic in an unsafe way.

Melissa Wissel:

Darting between traffic. And when you're driving too, you slam on your brakes, backs up the cars domino effect so you've got bathrooms, The barricades, the bike rack barricades we also have a different kind of barricade, the Meridian barricade, the police public safety barricades how are those working?

David Birchim:

Those are working great they're they're like big metal L brackets they're painted red. And. You'll see them around the pedestrian areas of downtown and those prevent cars vehicles cars and trucks. From driving in the areas where our visitors are walking. UM they they will stop a truck if you if you see them and you Google them you'll see videos of cars trying to get past these barricades and you can't do it so they protect our pedestrian mall downtown which is centered around Saint George street and our fire department and Police Department really like them they provide good safety for our visitors and we own them now so we'll be using them for other events where we try to protect our pedestrians and guests.

Melissa Wissel:

And it's not something that. Anybody sober or otherwise is going to just come upon and mess with them and move them or or Jimmy them around.

David Birchim:

No they weigh 800 pounds you can't you can't move them you can take the special diet like to move them around.

Melissa Wissel:

So I think they have training for that they I think they literally have training for when they deploy them

David Birchim:

They do.

Melissa Wissel:

to make sure that they deploy them safely and maneuver them and all that OK so. And. The traffic in and of itself how did how did traffic go we're going to see an increase in police and public safety assistance presence also at those intersection peak times.

David Birchim:

Yes so the critical intersections around downtown are actively managed meaning there's going to be a sheriff or a city police officer or PSA that when it gets to be so congested that they will turn the lights off and start directing traffic sort of the old fashioned way. And that gets pedestrians through the intersection without a conflict with the the vehicles. What we saw last year was there were so many pedestrians that they weren't respecting the lights and the lights would change so that the vehicle you could get through the intersection but the pedestrians kept going through the intersection. So you have to actively manage intersections when they get to be that crowded and we've done that this year.

Melissa Wissel:

One of the things that I'm in where I'm listening to things from a communication standpoint is. Sometimes there's a misconception that all of these things that we're doing are happening all of the time every day. And there are certain things that people are going to just see at peak times or on the weekends or we're going to be responsive.

David Birchim:

Right. The event takes place over 58 days but there are some peaks and valleys throughout that time frame so Light-Up! Night is the big night the Christmas regatta is a huge night. And then the Thanksgiving holiday is big for us and then the time between Christmas and New Year's we see a lot of visitors but there will be apart from those days there will be some weekdays where there's less visitors and and you'll see less of activity downtown.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's when we want to see our residents come out in the evenings during the week. 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 city manager David Birchim we're talking about everyone's favorite topic at this time of year nights of lights we just had light up night last weekend things are going well so far. Two other topics big topics tell me about geofencing. And the ride shares that's also another change.

David Birchim:

It is so if you're using Uber or Lyft. When you're downtown, those ride share services won't be picking you up from your restaurant in front of the restaurant like they would normally do. Instead, we have geofenced the downtown area and there are hubs where you will be directed to go to the clock tower at the VIC or the Plaza there's also a hub on the Bayfront so if you call for an Uber you're going to have to walk to one of these hubs to pick it up it's sort of like that. What you do at the airport they will come right to the front of the restaurant you're having dinner at anymore. That caused enormous problems last year where people couldn't get to their Uber or Lyft drivers because the drivers were stuck in traffic and then the drivers didn't want to move because they were waiting for their customers to come to them and so we've geofenced the downtown area and it seems to be working very well.

Melissa Wissel:

and that's also another one of those things that's not going to happen all day every day the geofencing is in effect from 5:00 PM to I think it's 1:00 AM or 2:00 AM so it's an evening restriction if you will or it's a change in service just in the Evening Times so if you're downtown at 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon you're not going to have that problem. Let's talk we've not talked about it yet the big P word of parking let's talk about parking and shuttles give us a quick rundown of what we can look for with parking and shuttles.

David Birchim:

We're asking everyone to park at the county government properties north of town that's the Health and Human services department. With county administration property as overflow that's where you'll pick up a free shuttle into town it's a park and ride service that we provide for our visitors it's free. And you'll pick up a shuttle and when I say shuttle it's not like a green trolley it's more like a greyhound bus. And it will take you from the county government property directly to the visitors Information Center and back to your car when you're finished visiting and it's free and it stops people from driving through downtown which is a big problem for us. But also gets you closer to your car and closer to where you want to go after you leave downtown so there's a benefit on your way out that you're not stuck in traffic going home either.

Melissa Wissel:

And we're also running Broudy's on those days as well.

David Birchim:

Yeah the Broudy's lot which is on the corner. Of King Street and US 1 and that's a quick walk from that site uh it's less than one mile from the Broudy's parking lot to the Plaza.

Melissa Wissel:

Which is a great option as well. The parking garage we changed we changed the cost of the parking garage let's talk about that a little bit people are very upset but again that's another one of those rules if you will. That only happens during certain times.

David Birchim:

It only Happens when the shuttles are running.

Melissa Wissel:

Right.

David Birchim:

And we we changed the rate from \$20.00 to \$40.00 but we didn't change the rate for residents for so folks who live in Saint Johns county who have the resident discount they still can pay \$3.00 to to enter the garage. But if you don't live in Saint Johns county or you don't have that resident discount it will be \$40.00. And what we're trying to do is create a disincentive for people to park there. We really want to push people to our free park and ride shuttle service. Rather than have people come to the garage that garage fills up so quickly and what we saw last year was even though we were messaging out that the garage was closed people were still driving to the garage. Thinking that they could sneak in as soon as the garage reopened and it just caused a traffic jam around the garage.

Melissa Wissel:

The what the last piece I would want us to talk about quick is when you're talking we you and I are both bathrooms parking closures of the garages there's this great new thing called

the mobile app have you tried it? I'm putting on the spot. It's it's amazing give our listeners a sneak peek the mobile app came together with the VCB.

David Birchim:

The VCB produced a mobile app it's beautiful very well done it has interactive maps for parking so if you did want to drive downtown you could look on the app to see whether the parking lot you want to go to is filled or not or the garage is full. It also has maps that show all the public restrooms downtown so if you need to use the restroom you can pull it up and see where the closest public restroom is. It also has advertising for all the local restaurants and attractions and it's just great it's really well done.

Melissa Wissel:

Real time camera feeds I haven't seen the camera feeds but I understand there are camera feeds

David Birchim:

I haven't seen that.

Melissa Wissel:

I will say talking about again about those bathrooms as I said walking back to City Hall I did use the app a little bit out of curiosity but also out of need and it will tell you when you when you tap on it for example Government House has public restrooms but I was walking at 7:00, And it says open tomorrow at 8:00 AM so it will tell you that it's closed and you can look on that map big those big marker. Bubbles like you would see in your Google map it's a very intuitive program. I do want you to answer one last question real quick transit lane next year.

David Birchim:

Hopefully. We are we're trying to. Convince DOT to restriped San Marco avenue. And create a dedicated transit lane on san Marco avenue we they don't need to acquire any right of way that the roadway is wide enough as it is they just need to restripe it. And if it did so then

that transit lane could then be used as a bicycle lane when we're not using it for events and we've approached them and they're. Open to the. Idea but it's a government agent the state government agency it takes some time to get that done.

Melissa Wissel:

All right we are out of time lots of great things. CityStAug.com/NightsofLights if you're looking for this information there's other stuff. We didn't even talk about the island and the star circulator and all that good stuff so lots of great things and thank you for all the work you've done I know this is probably not the biggest thing you thought you'd be having a challenge with this year but it's been going really great and thank you for all your hard work.

David Birchim:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

really and we'll have you back at the end to hear how great it really how how well did it really go in January. Thanks David.

David Birchim:

Sounds good OK.

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 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*.