

The Break Room with Chief Carlos Aviles, November 25, 2025

Narrator:

You've 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. With the holidays upon us and Light-Up! Night behind us I've invited Saint Augustine Fire Chief Carlos Aviles back into studio to remind us about holiday fire safety and to give us an update on how things are going so far in the nation 's oldest city as we are in full swing of Nights of Lights. Welcome back

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Thanks for having me yeah it's great to be back.

Melissa Wissel:

So let's start let's rip the Band-Aid off how are we doing with Nights of Lights there's a lot leading up to it.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

There was certainly more so than in any year that I've been with the city yes so a lot more coordinated efforts really looking at this holistically kind of from the 10,000 foot view down and It's really it's a very sensitive topic I feel like it's a bit of a. But. Of a tug of war between the business community needing the economic development and trying to shore up quality of life for residents so those are certainly the 2 big objectives.

Melissa Wissel:

I think it's the first time anyone has articulated using the term tug of war I think it's great it's.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

That's what it feels like it's like trying to strike a balance there where you know we're trying to meet the needs of so many different groups of folks and and every one of them deserves a seat at the table so so how do we accomplish that you know enhancing safety trying to work on traffic flow patterns and giving everybody a little bit so it's like everyone needs to. You know sort of sacrifice a little bit to try to make this go a little bit smoother.

Melissa Wissel:

and in in the analogy of a tug of war we really don't want either side to fall down we want everybody to remain standing

Chief Carlos Aviles:

correct

Melissa Wissel:

so yeah how did we do on Light-Up! Night? I know Light-Up! Night is it's sort of that immersion of everybody. Coming in you actually told us a a funny factoid that blew us all away that people actually were asking you hey what's going on.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yes yeah no we we spend a lot of time down you know in the Plaza stage with folks. And so it was a large crowd I mean kind of what we expected I don't think it was over what was expected it certainly wasn't under so but it's also a really good opportunity for us to be seen and interact with the public help answer questions you know what time do the lights come on where the closest restroom so how do I get back to the shuttle but yeah overwhelmingly there were. Quite a few folks that were just walking around the Plaza asking like what's

going on here tonight why are all these people gathered here and so but it's just a good indication of how many folks are already planning trips that you know don't even realize that this is an event that is happening. So yeah it's just one of the joys of heavy tourism area for sure.

Melissa Wissel:

And you certainly told them do you have the mobile app.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Oh yes no we tell everybody to download the app a lot of great information.

Melissa Wissel:

The bathrooms in particular and the parking and the shuttles and the whole thing pedestrians everyone was on on their best behavior? How are the pedestrian barricades in the Meridian barricades working?

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yeah so far so good so I mean that's I think definitely something that folks will notice when they come downtown this year so on on peak nights those weekend evening nights. You'll notice some pedestrian barricades that are meant to sort of corral folks to cross the street at designated crosswalks and on specific nights those will be staffed with law enforcement or PSA 's to help folks kind of safely navigate that area and keep traffic moving. And then you'll also see specifically around Saint George Street in that heavy pedestrian core the big red Meridian vehicular barricades that were deployed now and those will be up for the entirety of. Nights of lights so.

Melissa Wissel:

And you're certified not certifiable but certified.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

certified. Yes Yep so.

Melissa Wissel:

To move them? locate there you're not going to walk by and just move it in a drunken stupor?

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Correct I mean you could try. I wouldn't, you know each barricade weighs close to 700 pounds so you know once fully deployed they're sort of down on the ground and you know designed to stop up to a heavy truck so it's just a part of an ongoing enhanced public safety plan to Try to safeguard our visitors and residents and business owners.

Melissa Wissel:

And you guys are having an OK time. I know some of the concerns for fire and police and I guess more so for you guys because of the size of your vehicles is the ability to respond and you stage anything down in the core at all during those peak nights.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yeah we do so on peak nights we we will increase staffing have some folks come in you know it's a very heavy load on us and law enforcement throughout this entire process. Because we're trying to answer the service demand. Of you know a normal sized city of our size and then it's really swells up and so it forces us to kind of do some risk management on our part and so we do increase staffing we'll have. Some folks out on side by sides that can get through the historic district quickly and you know in the event of a medical emergency. Respond to folks. Treat and then if they need to be transported. We'll begin that process of sort of evacuating them from that heavily congested area and then stage an advanced life support unit outside of where all of the congestion is transfer care there making ensuring that they can it's 2 things ensuring they can get to a hospital. Faster but also dramatically decreasing the amount of time that that advanced life support unit is tied up and unavailable.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. Essentially you're eliminating needing an ambulance staged at the corner of Avenida Menendez and Cathedral you've got the and I did happen to see you driving by you got the 2 seater or the what the merv but now you've got this very sleek looking kind of as like hey you didn't pick us up and. Rachel says yeah I think there was only 2 seats and 2 stretchers so unless one of us was going to ride in the stretcher.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yes I know it's a it's just a new vehicle that we deployed for this year it's got a full size ambulance stretcher on the back of it where we could get down into the historic core. Quickly provide care for folks and then if need be just it's a rapid deployment of being able to get them out of there there's a seat in the back for an attendant to tend to those in need and then like I said we sort of just evacuate them out to more advanced care.

Melissa Wissel:

And a quick shout out to you were saying that. That was customized we or there was some work done some fabrication done by some.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

So we we. We did have to do a lot of customization to it you know with the the ability to procure the vehicle and the needed equipment really wasn't available until October 1st. In the new budget year and with Light-Up! Night being moved up to the 15th of November it gave us a very short flash to bang time so to speak of being able to get this thing. Completely outfitted and ready to go and so just huge kudos to our folks out at our fleet department specifically Travis who's one of our mechanics and a very gifted fabricator. We tried to secure what we call a skid unit so it's a unit that goes in the back of the vehicle that holds the stretcher and has an attendant seat but just the lead times to get them would not have lined up with Nights of Lights and it was ungodly expensive and so we were able to. Just manufacture one in house that turned out even better than the one that we were looking to purchase and so it was a good cost savings but just a really great example of some of the talent that we have here within the city and and the folks that. We have on staff.

Melissa Wissel:

Wonderful. Well before we move on to holiday fire safety if you're just now tuning in you're listening to *The Break Room* I'm Melissa Wissel communications director with Fire Chief Carlos Aviles just did a quick wrap up of Nights of Lights so if you want to go back and listen but now we're going to move forward with our remaining few minutes and talk about holiday fire safety we've got deep frying. Turkeys unattended stove tops children running around extension cords hit us up with all of it.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

All of it now I mean so the high level stuff is definitely you know making sure those those holiday turkeys if you are choosing to fry them that they are completely thawed and dried before you begin that process.

Melissa Wissel:

You don't want to end up on TikTok.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

no don't be that person and then space heater safety so that's always something that we see this time of year we did have an unusually cold snap very early and like I know we've got another one Coming up and so it's just a reminder to make sure that you keep those things away from furniture curtains things like that so a good rule of thumb is 5 to 10 feet away from anything flammable and make sure that it's a newer model space heater that has the. The built in safety mechanism in the event it gets tipped over.

Melissa Wissel:

so so if you have a sentimental attachment to that space heater that you've had since you were a kid you should probably not be using it.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

No just let it go it's OK hold on to it for nostalgia study but don't use it.

Melissa Wissel:

Bring it bring it to the bring it to the recycling event perhaps and things like candles extension cords what's the good rule about extension cords you probably wouldn't like to see my Christmas village with the extension cord Tucked behind the.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yeah I'm a realist I know that folks are going to use them I think a good rule of thumb is if you're if you're not home just go ahead and unplug it from the wall leave everything connected to where it's just a simple you know one plugin and you're and you're good to go but I wouldn't leave them unattended for long periods of time.

Melissa Wissel:

Candles go with the the battery operated ones

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Yeah they look great.

Melissa Wissel:

and they flicker even I'm going to ask you this one give me a little bit are we are we smart around here we got a few minutes to go on electric cars what's your I mean there we see it in the news. There actually was there one recently that they in Saint Johns county that they said had to do with a battery a car battery or.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

So it's it's certainly something that's become a lot more prevalent and it's not just the electric cars like we're seeing it all over the place specifically here on you know on the First Coast and in in Saint John's county a lot of fires related to golf carts that have lithium batteries.

Melissa Wissel:

That's what it was.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

That are that are stored indoors for charging and E bikes.

Melissa Wissel:

Is there can you say you can you explain like what is it is it the lithium is it part of the?

Chief Carlos Aviles:

There it's yeah it's mostly just the lithium components and just getting overheated during charging in the cord failing and so they burn very very hot and very fast and they're usually plugged in. In non living spaces so like garages and or you know outside on porches or things like that so but we have seen a huge increase of that and it's not just us it's statewide so now the state fire Marshall 's office is requiring us to submit a special report statewide for any department that responds to a lithium battery fire and we're. Trying to track those. A little bit more aggressively around the state to kind of differentiate those from traditional you know fires that we have.

Melissa Wissel:

Abby did mention the lithium batteries to us when she was on talking about phone chargers and when you when you get your phone if you take your phone off and it's really hot.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Right I mean basically they could be damaged just you know from from contact from bumping into something and it just compromising the structural integrity of the core or it's just not assembled properly because it comes from somewhere overseas but and I don't want to make it out like I'm against them.

Melissa Wissel:

Is that? Somewhere we shouldn't be buying from.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Or that they just are inherently dangerous I just think that you should use some due regard when it comes to them I wouldn't leave those things plugged in overnight while you're sleeping you know make.

Melissa Wissel:

Like your your golf cart.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

Correct yeah just make sure that you. Casually keeping an eye on it or set a timer or something like that but I mean just those small things could make a big difference or if you're going to put them in a garage or something maybe just go through the extra steps of adding some additional smoke detectors in that area that may help alert you.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah Or tell Alexa to set a timer for you and she'll tell you when to turn it off.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

The small things will make a difference but it I mean it's becoming a much more frequent event than we're accustomed to seeing so it's worth mentioning.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Melissa Wissel:

Lots of great information good to hear that we're all behaving ourselves and doing what we should be doing for Nights of Lights. And thank you for all the work that you and the fire department has done getting us set up keeping us safe I know you guys all got certified for the barricades and you guys partner out really well with our Police Department and we appreciate all the work that you do and of course it's always good to have the fire safety tip so we'll have you back again and we survived hurricane season.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

We did what an what an awesome hurricane year this is wonderful.

Melissa Wissel:

Nothing I am going to knock I don't I don't normally knock but we we made it so thanks again for coming by.

Chief Carlos Aviles:

I appreciate it thank you for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

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