

The Break Room with Mark Hartley, Streets and Grounds Manager, January 13, 2026

Narrator

You've tuned into another edition of *The Break Room*, a weekly conversation about how the City of St. Augustine works, from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the City of St. Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel, *The Break Room* offers a closer look at 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. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of St. Augustine.

As we've just wrapped up the 2025–2026 Nights of Lights season, I've invited Mark Hartley back to *The Break Room*. Mark is the Streets and Grounds Manager. He oversees all the city personnel responsible for putting up the lights, maintaining the holiday tree, decorations on streetlights, lampposts—everything.

It's been another banner year. Mark, welcome back.

Mark Hartley

Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

Melissa Wissel

It's been a while. I want to take a little trip down memory lane. I hope our listeners are ok with that. The first time you were on *The Break Room*, Paul Williamson was our Public Affairs Director, and you had only been with the city a few months.

Mark Hartley

Yeah, like three months. I was very green.

Melissa Wissel

It was like, “Welcome to the city—tell us about yourself.” I started doing the broadcast at the end of 2019, right at the beginning of 2020.

The irony is that today—the day we’re recording this—is January 8, 2026. You were here January 8, 2020.

Mark Hartley

It’s just fate to be here today.

Melissa Wissel

That was my seventh interview. I was keeping track. At that point, you had only been here just over a year.

You’ve been back with Glabra. We were talking about tree canopy and monarch butterflies.

Mark Hartley

Yup

I remember.

Melissa Wissel

We’re going to circle way back now and get back to those basics.

Nights of Lights—did you survive this year?

Mark Hartley

We are surviving. We're in the final week, and it's been good. We've done well this year with the changes and traffic and such. I think it's been a banner year for numbers, and overall it's been a good year.

Melissa Wissel

Tell me about the decorations and the tree. We did an artificial tree last year, but apparently that didn't fly because we were back to a real tree this year.

Mark Hartley

Yeah, we got a tree from Sugar Mountain Nursery in Boone, North Carolina. They came through well for us—absolutely gorgeous tree. I think everyone can acknowledge that.

Melissa Wissel

It was really full.

Mark Hartley

It was very full, very fresh cut. They cut it the day before they brought it. So you can really tell.

The crews did a phenomenal job decorating it. From getting it upright, getting it straight, getting it lit, getting the decorations on, getting the ornamental fencing around it. I'm really proud of my crew.

Melissa Wissel

People don't always realize when you say "getting it upright" and holding it there. A couple of years ago, I think it was during Tropical Storm Nicole, you came in the morning of the lighting and it was on the ground sideways.

Mark Hartley

Yeah, a nor'easter blew through from the bayfront and took it over. Thank God it didn't break anything. We got it back upright, but lessons learned.

Melissa Wissel

And the tree canopy in the plaza—how are our trees doing? I know that's always a concern. I worry one day we'll come in and that one right in the middle is dead.

Mark Hartley

They're definitely aging. We've spent the last two years, we've underplanted some new oaks in hopes that they come up as these others age out. We do annual pruning with an arborist, so we keep a good eye on them.

Melissa Wissel

You do that throughout the city too.

Mark Hartley

We do, throughout the core city.

Melissa Wissel

Now that we're coming up on the end of Nights of Lights, the plaza—you walk in there on the morning of the 12th and think, "Oh, yikes."

Mark Hartley

Yeah, it's a challenge, but we switched to a Celebration Bermuda a few years ago. It's browned out and pretty beat down, but it's pretty resilient. Within about a month, you'll start seeing it green back up, and we'll have far less sod to replace.

Melissa Wissel

So what we see right now is just dormant.

Mark Hartley

Yes—very dormant and very walked on. We do have some dirt spots, and we'll replace those, but it'll recover well.

Melissa Wissel

Let me ask you this, Another thing—part of the reason we started putting that decorative fence around the tree was people stealing the ornaments. Did we have many Grinches stealing the ornaments this year?

Mark Hartley

It's been Far less. I think residents understand, and a lot of our visitors respect it. I think it's a rare occasion. We've found a good way to decorate it and protect it at the same time. And make it a photo opportunity as well.

Melissa Wissel

I think the fence actually makes it a little charming.

Mark Hartley

Yeah, it gives it that front-yard look.

Melissa Wissel

Yes, and it's still the photo spot.

Mark Hartley

It's iconic St. Augustine small town.

Melissa Wissel

And did you find the red bulb this year?

Mark Hartley

We probably did. I did find a red bulb, yes. It's always a cool thing. And there's a back story as well. I think a lot of the trolley drivers have caught on to that and it's a kind of a cool thing.

Melissa Wissel

Can you tell us that story real quick?

Mark Hartley

I only know part of the story. So One of our employees—his daughter was very young at the time—and he was spending a lot of time putting the lights up. He thought it would be cool to put that up. A connection to the family. Something unique for people to look for year to year, and it became a tradition.

Melissa Wissel

I've also heard there may be a green light now for the grandchild.

Mark Hartley

There may be. That's a rumor.

Melissa Wissel

Trust but verify. We're not quite sure. If you're listening and we're past Nights of Lights, you'll have to look for it next year.

Melissa Wissel

If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to *The Break Room*. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of St. Augustine, and I'm joined by Mark Hartley, the man responsible for all the workers, all the elves who make Nights of Lights happen.

We are through Nights of Lights. Let's talk about what's next. Coming up is Arbor Day on January 16 in Connor Park. Tell us about Arbor Day and the significance of our Tree City status.

Mark Hartley

Yes, so we're entering our 43rd year as a Tree City Award winner. There's an application process for that. You have to be a responsible tree city—pruning, constantly adding and replacing your canopy, and other things that go into it like population versus trees and how you affect the community and how you react to the community.

We're very proud to be 43 straight years as a Tree City.

Melissa Wissel

There aren't many cities that have that long standing tree cities?

Mark Hartley

I think we're in the top ten. That's something to be very proud of.

And St. Augustine is very iconic for its tree-lined streets. For us to have a part in maintaining that and the longevity of it is pretty cool.

Melissa Wissel

And it's not just about plopping up some palm trees. There's a method to it.

Mark Hartley

There is a method. We try to create a variety of native, weather-standing trees. Naturally, we have saltwater intrusion here and king tides, so we try to plant trees that will be the hardest to survive those.

Melissa Wissel

Talking about Arbor Day—this broadcast airs Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. If you're listening on Sunday, you will have missed Arbor Day.

It's Friday, January 16, at Connor Park in Old City South. Tell us about the trees that we plant and the saplings. People can actually pick up free tree saplings.

Mark Hartley

That's right. This year we'll be at Connor Park, which is a newer park for the city at 5 South Street. We'll be planting two sand live oaks on the far east side of the property, away from the water line. That's something that we're really looking forward to. It's something we like to do, because it is a new park and we want to establish some trees in there. But also honor the person that the park is named after.

This year we're giving away four types of saplings: red cedar, winged elm, pine, and a persimmon. We started this a few years ago, we added in a citrus tree so you'd actually have some sort of fruit growing down the road, as it grows up. We thought that would be a flowering tree and we thought that would be a good touch to add to the city.

Melissa Wissel

And if you come to the ceremony of Arbor Day this year because it's in Old City South there's not a lot of parking. So we want you to try and find parking and walk to it or ride your bike. We also have a drive-through. Can you tell us about the drive-through?

Mark Hartley

Yes. The drive-through will be on West Castillo at the dental building near Francis Field. We'll have a couple of people there handing out about half the trees there, with the other half at the event itself. They'll be there while quantities last.

Melissa Wissel

So if you can't make it down to South Street. Drive through at the side of Francis Field. They'll be handing out the free sapling give-aways. While supplies last. I think they go out there around 10?

Mark Hartley

You don't even have to get out of your car. You just pull up, ask for the variety you'd like, and if we have it, we'll hand it to you. And you'll have your tree.

Melissa Wissel

Excellent. Last thing Before we wrap up, is there anything coming down the pike. I know you guys are involved in a lot of our projects. Any of these seawall projects, stuff that impacts your folks?

Mark Hartley

Yes, the seawall project impacts us quite a bit. We have landscaped area right there and streetlights in that area, and it will affect Nights of Lights next year. We play hand in hand. We have irrigation in there. As we're excited for the improvements, but we also hold our breath a little as things get torn out to be put back. You know it's a long time coming. No one wants the inconvenience of the traffic it creates, but it has to be done. St. Augustine is only getting bigger, and waiting will only make it worse.

Melissa Wissel

One other question I have for you. When we get to the King Street beautification project, what are you all involved with now and how does that change?

Mark Hartley

The landscaping will change some. There will be wider sidewalks, so some of my crews that do landscaping will decrease a bit, but street-side maintenance will increase. They'll need to maintain those sidewalks. It's a give and take.

Melissa Wissel

I see your folks out regularly when I come in to work in the morning. They're blowing off streets, keeping the city looking beautiful. We really appreciate the work your teams do.

Mark Hartley

Thank you. I'm very proud of my team. They work very hard, and it's my honor to lead them.

Melissa Wissel

Any other projects that you have coming up? I know I might be catching you off guard. I don't know if there are any other big things. I know you guys are in a good rhythm.

Mark Hartley

We've gained some new properties over the last couple of years, many of them are passive properties. This spring, we'll focus on mowing and maintaining those areas. And they are conservation properties. So that would be our biggest focus this year is getting them off on a good standing and getting them cleaned up.

Melissa Wissel

Do you go in and do any type of cleanup on them? You know if I bought a piece of property and if they are overgrown or anything like that? Do you guys go in and spruce it up?

Mark Hartley

Yes. A lot of these properties have had some foot traffic even when they were private properties. We have J.B. Miller, who manages our properties. He is just brilliant with it. He kind of creates paths and sometimes we'll go and do some underbrushing where necessary. We try to keep it as natural as possible, so it's kind of minimal but it does create some mowing and such.

Melissa Wissel

But you don't go in and put in a flower bed?

Mark Hartley

No, probably not. We'll keep it St. Augustine natural.

Melissa Wissel

Well, we are out of time. I appreciate you coming back—six years later. Lets' not wait six year next time.

Mark Hartley

My pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Melissa Wissel

Thanks so much, Mark.

As we wrap up another edition of *The Break Room*, we want to keep you informed about what's happening in and around the city and that you hear it here from the people who do the work to make it happen every day.

Visit us on the website at **CityStAug.com**, sign up for our weekly e-newsletter *News & Notes*, it comes to your inbox every Friday and listen anytime to this or past episodes of *The Break Room* at **CityStAugRadio.com**.

Until next time, thanks for tuning in.

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 Communication 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*.