

State's small cities find fine way to raise money

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Jim Wooten discusses the ways that Georgia **small cities** use **to raise money**. Got a bad tail light? Take my advice: Stay off Rockbridge Road through the DeKalb County community of Pine Lake.

The community tops every other city or county in Georgia by a country mile in the proportion of its revenues that come from fines, forfeitures and court fees. Pine Lake's traffic revenues for the 1991 fiscal year amounted **to** an astounding 56.1 percent of the general-fund budget. Anything more than 5 percent is considered noteworthy.

Across the state, a scattering of **cities** and counties may have gotten the jump on the Georgia General Assembly in recognizing the value of fines and fees **to** increase revenues.

In Mountain City on Highway 441 in Rabun County, for example, fines make up 35.3 percent of city revenues. In East Ellijay in Gilmer County, it's 32.3 percent, while neighboring Ellijay, by comparison, collects 8.8 percent.

For some Georgia **cities**, the reliance on fines raises questions about whether the police department exists **to** enforce laws or **to** generate revenues. Almost a dozen collect more than 20 percent.

They include Hilltonia, a dot on Highway 24 in Screven County, with 21.6 percent and, just down the road, Newington, with 20 percent; Leslie, on Highway 280 in Sumter County, with 22.2 percent; Luthersville on Highway 27 in Meriwether County, 20.4 percent; Midway, on Highway 17 in Liberty County, 25.7 percent; Omega, on Highway 319 in Tift County, 30.5 percent; Portal, on Highway 80 in Bulloch County, with 29.2 percent; Nicholls on Highway 32 in Coffee County, with 21.1 percent; and Tyrone on Highway 74 in Fayette County, with 20.7 percent.

Metro Atlanta **cities** such as Clarkston, Doraville, Lilburn, Riverdale, Suwanee, Temple and Woodstock all collect more than 15 percent of revenues from fines.

Interstate highways, while yet **to** prove themselves generators of economic development, do bring in the revenue. Candler County (Metter, I-16), Cook County (I-75, Adel) and Treutlen County (Soperton, I-16) collect more than 18 percent of revenues from traffic fines.

The first reaction, when a city collects 56.1 percent of its revenues from traffic fines, is **to** suspect a speed trap. Not so, says Pine Lake's Municipal Court Judge Alan Mullinax. "Pine Lake writes almost no speeding tickets," he says. "In the seven or eight years I've been there, I can't recall five speeding tickets."

But a bad tail light or an expired tag is a different matter. Motorists with expired tags frequently are charged with other offenses -expired licenses, no proof of insurance, cracked windshields and even DUI. The judge says he imposes the fines mandated by statute.

And while he believes traffic fines should support public safety, "city fathers have never talked **to** me about budget," nor has anybody suggested that police finance city government.

The numbers may not add up **to** speed trap, but they do suggest that Georgians would be well-advised **to** proceed cautiously, if at all, through **cities** and counties that police traffic aggressively.

It's expensive enough **to** support your own government. Why support somebody else's? Mr. Wooten is editor of The Journal's editorial pages.