

## **Pine Lake losing that hometown feel - Political battle turns community into a house divided**

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Cindy Nestor says she can remember when the city of **Pine Lake** had a "hometown feel." Since those days, **Pine Lake** hasn't changed much. It hasn't been swallowed up by urban sprawl or been invaded by criminals.

But nasty political battles in recent years have divided the little central DeKalb town. Last month, a case over the validity of the ballots used in the 1994 mayor's race reached the state Supreme Court. As a result, Mike Stuckey had to step down from the mayor's post, leaving Mayor Pro Tem Linda Unger in the position until new elections this fall. And, under the city's interpretation of the ruling, **Pine Lake** may have two mayoral elections this year - one in September, one in November.

Yet Nestor, and some other residents, remain skeptical about the possibility that the dust will settle after the new elections.

"This used to be a wonderful hometown," said Nestor, a resident for 40 years. "Now, it's a neighborhood divided. It's not like a town anymore, it's more like us on one side and them on the other."

Located off Rockbridge Road, the town of about 800 people looks more like a lakeside neighborhood than a city. The 350 or so homes surround the actual **Pine Lake**, which is small, private and picturesque.

Besides having a reputation for being a speed trap, the city made news in 1993 when it bought two cat traps for residents to borrow when strays became a problem.

The recent state Supreme Court case resulted from an electoral challenge filed by **Pine Lake** resident Tommie Storms, who ran against Stuckey in last year's mayoral race. Storms lost the race 77-75, with three ballots thrown out because they were improperly deposited in the box. Storms challenged the vote, claiming that the balloting instructions were unclear, leading some voters to place the incorrect portion of the two-part ballot in the box.

The case went in January to DeKalb County Superior Court, where Judge Marvin Sorrells ruled the election was invalid and ordered **Pine Lake** to hold a special election. But Stuckey appealed to the state Supreme Court and lost in June.

If the case was divisive, it was also expensive. The city spent more than \$24,000 between July 1994 and January 1995 in legal fees and related costs. After the decision in January, the City Council decided the case was too expensive to pursue further, and Stuckey funded the appeal on his own, spending between \$12,000 and \$15,000 in legal fees. Storms says she also spent over \$10,000 from her own pocket in legal fees.

Both Storms and Stuckey say they're running again this fall. And both candidates agree that this has been a lot of trouble for a \$3,600-a-year mayor's job.

Color photo: Mayoral candidate Tommie Storms, shown in her office at the Art Institute of Atlanta, recently won a state Supreme Court case that invalidated some of the ballots from the **Pine Lake** election she lost last year. / JUSTIN WILLIAMS / Staff