

EDITORIAL Pine Lake ticketing tactics cross the line

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The 815 residents of **Pine Lake** in DeKalb County enjoy some enviable amenities. A truck vacuums leaves at curbside so residents don't have to bag them. Fancy decorations adorn a scenic lake at Christmastime. There's even a renovated clubhouse for gatherings, picnics and parties. And who pays the lion's share of the cost for these luxuries? Motorists with a burned-out taillight or an expired license plate who are unlucky enough to pass through this sliver of a city.

An Atlanta Journal-Constitution/WSB-TV study shows that **Pine Lake** is Georgia's most prolific ticket-writer, even though the town polices just three-tenths of a mile along Rockbridge Road. For every dime residents pay in property taxes, fined motorists kick in a dollar. **Pine Lake** has managed to turn its civic obligation to enforce the law into a profitable enterprise, and members of DeKalb's legislative delegation promise to stop the roadside abuses.

Pine Lake and the handful of other Georgia communities that rely heavily on revenue from traffic fines ought to gird for tighter days ahead, because the gravy train is coming to an end.

Pine Lake was Georgia's all-time ticket champ even before it got serious about collecting dollars along Rockbridge Road. From 1989 to '97, it collected 51.1 percent of its revenue from traffic fines, a state record. In '98, though, the city got downright entrepreneurial: **Pine Lake** increased its police force from three to 10, and more than doubled its roadside take in a single year. In '97 the city raised \$240,569 in traffic fines. In '98, the amount was \$860,000, or more than \$1,000 per resident.

A few months ago, three protesters hoisted pickets, charging the mostly white town with harassing motorists in the largely black section of DeKalb County. The daily vigil amounted to no more than a minor irritant to city officials until the protesters began informing motorists that they could have their cases moved from the **Pine Lake** Municipal Court to DeKalb County State Court. And by changing the jurisdiction, the motorists would pay their fines to DeKalb County, not **Pine Lake**.

The protesters' campaign cost the city \$25,000 in March alone. "They're breaking me," Police Chief Mac McGlamery said in a candid acknowledgement that the fines were needed to pay the city's bills. "If this keeps up, I can't pay my force."

The protesters' tactics also angered **Pine Lake** Municipal Court Judge Alan Mullinax, who threatened them with charges of practicing law without a license and of "barratry," an obscure felony involving stirring up groundless legal actions. Mullinax also ordered Darryl Dorton and Douglas Coffey to show why they should not be held in criminal contempt of court.

That order was lifted last week at the behest of the city, but it never should have been issued, and it showed the desperate measures the city was willing to take to intimidate the protesters and protect its revenue base.

Dorton and Coffey have also claimed that the city's police officers target black motorists, and a Journal-Constitution analysis lends that charge some support. It reveals that nearly 86.5 percent

of 2,270 tickets issued in the past six months went to black motorists. DeKalb District Attorney J. Tom Morgan is investigating these allegations.

Every locality has a responsibility to enforce the law, and **Pine Lake** is no exception.

McGlamery says the police presence has deterred crime, and routine stops have led to the arrest of suspects wanted on more serious charges.

But localities should not be raising most of their budget from the wallets of motorists passing through, nor should law enforcement's primary purpose be to generate revenue. This year, the General Assembly passed a measure that strips radar licenses from localities that generate more than 40 percent of revenue from speeding tickets. **Pine Lake** hasn't written a speeding ticket since 1997, but the spirit of the law is clear: Localities ought not rely on tickets as a major source of revenue.

Pine Lake should scale back the city budget it recently doubled, lease out its leaf vacuum and start living within the means of its residents. And if it continues to harass motorists, legislators should consider pulling **Pine Lake's** city charter.

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Photo: Three cars line up while a police officer shakes money out of another car. / MARK GILES / Special