

Former Pine Lake critics applaud police changes

BYLINE: Will Anderso, Ben Smith III; Staff

DATE: March 16, 2000

PUBLICATION: The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution

EDITION: Home; The Atlanta Journal Constitution

SECTION: DeKalb Extra

PAGE: JA10

The city of **Pine Lake**, beleaguered by accusations last year that it padded city coffers by targeting African-Africans for traffic fines, received public praise last week from former critics. At a news conference on the steps of the state Capitol on Thursday, Joy Berry, executive director of the Georgia Human Relations Commission, said that in one year, a city "in crisis" had transformed its police department and "unlawful, unethical and bigoted police practices" into a department that practices "fairness, justice and sensitivity while upholding the law." Berry was joined by **Pine Lake** Mayor Al Fowler and state lawmakers and activists who had threatened to seek a revocation of the city's charter following news reports of ticketing practices. At the news conference, state Rep. Arnold Ragas (D-Stone Mountain) and others said they would not pursue a charter revocation as long as the city upheld its agreement to abandon the ticketing practices, established under a previous **Pine Lake** administration, as well as other policy changes.

"I'm not interested in eliminating small cities," said John Evans, president of the DeKalb chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The comment drew applause from about 35 **Pine Lake** residents on Saturday who watched a videotape of the news conference during a city meeting.

Fowler said the number of traffic citations issued by **Pine Lake** police plummeted this January, compared with the same month the previous year, from 318 citations to 89 citations. Arrests dropped from 101 to 17. Last January also was the month that Charles Tucker was hired as **Pine Lake** police chief.

Fowler said the city has had to do some belt-tightening as its budget was cut from about \$1 million in 1999 to \$550,000 in 2000. As a result, its police force was cut from 10 to five with two reserve officers, and the number of patrol cars was cut from six to four.

Karen Fitzpatrick, a Stone Mountain resident once ticketed by the **Pine Lake** police and member of an independent task force recommending change, said the city's former aggressive ticketing practices were "like a rotten onion, when you peel back the layers, the smellier it gets.

"There were a lot of citizens courageous enough to take a brave stand. This is a brave, outstanding community led by a brave, outstanding mayor who wasn't afraid to take these problems on," Fitzpatrick said.

Fowler, calling the city's transformation "an ethical renaissance," said, "We're proud of where we're at, and we're proud of where we are going."

Photo: **Pine Lake** Mayor Al Fowler: "We're proud of where we're at, and we're proud of where we are going."/ JOHN SPINK / Staff