

## **Town's latest controversy: Annexation talk**

Traffic revenue is down and taxes are up, but Pine Lake denies it has its eye on a neighboring subdivision

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The city of **Pine Lake** says it is not annexing the homes of neighboring communities, but residents of some surrounding subdivisions are not convinced. Members of the Sheppard's Crossing Neighborhood Association have circulated a petition against **Pine Lake** encroachment, despite the city's assurances no plans for annexation exist. The city says residents' fears are based on rumors.

But the controversy hits the small city of 815 residents at a time of rapid adjustment after the loss over the past two years of the city's main revenue source -- traffic tickets.

The former resort town on the road to Stone Mountain became infamous last year after it planned to raise three-quarters of its former \$1.1 million budget from ticketing, a far greater percentage than any other Georgia town. Almost all of the tickets were to nonresidents who drove along a 1,500-foot stretch of Rockbridge Road bordering the town, and about 70 percent of them were black.

The ticketing touched off a firestorm of protests, charges of racism and unwanted public scrutiny. Mayor Al Fowler dramatically scaled back **Pine Lake**'s traffic enforcement and vowed to create a "kindlier and gentler city," now dubbed "The New **Pine Lake**." He cut the police force from 10 officers to four and reassessed the city's ticket fine system.

Almost one year after the ticketing controversies, the city's projected 2000 budget is down to \$619,392, but its chief source of revenue is still about \$210,000 from traffic fines. Another chunk of the city's income will come from a hike in property taxes, which increased from 9 mills last year to 21 mills for 2000. Fowler said the city's budget is currently balanced, but without the ticket revenue, the city has had to look into other revenue sources including foundations, grants and annexation.

"The city has transformed," he said, citing the increasing property values and commercial success. "The old way was to lower the millage rate and increase the fines. We have had to adapt, but we are well on our way to various new sources of funding and change."

The 133 1/3 percent tax increase was one of the reasons Sheppard's Crossing residents said they did not want to become part of the city. The neighborhood association asked city officials to attend a homeowners meeting and discuss the possibilities of being annexed by **Pine Lake**. The association dropped the idea after the May 28 meeting.

"**Pine Lake** cannot offer us any services that would warrant being annexed," said Sheppard's Crossing Neighborhood Association Chairman Jerry White.

After the meeting, however, rumors circulated the city had asked Sheppard's Crossing to become a part of **Pine Lake**. June 1, the city issued a statement denying the rumors, saying, "This appears to be another unfortunate situation of a few **Pine Lake** critics making yet another attempt to cause confusion and divide our Community with erroneous communications and inflammatory methods."

Resident Jay Kenning, who lives and works in **Pine Lake**, said he did not feel the city was ready to annex anything.

"I don't want them to annex, because **Pine Lake** is a city that tends to misbehave," he said.

"When you raise the millage rate 133 percent it is obvious we are not stable. There are lots of room to improve."

Some **Pine Lake** residents said Monday they did not know about the tax-rate increase that was approved by the City Council in early May and figured into the 2000 budget earlier in the year. Others said they were angry about the reasons for the millage hike.

Debra Sykes, who moved to **Pine Lake** five years ago for the small-town atmosphere, said she did not want to pay more for city services because the police cannot pull over speeders.

"The mayor has given his power away," she said, adding she didn't know about the consequences of the tax hike on her property. "If people are breaking the law in **Pine Lake**, then there should be someone to catch them."

> ON THE WEB : For more information about this topic:

<http://voyager.home.mindspring.com/pinelake>

<http://www.mindspring.com/~deni/pinelake/index.html>

Photo: Signature scene from **Pine Lake**: The City Hall houses the police department. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff

Photo: Signature scene from **Pine Lake**: Water enthusiasts use the beach. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff

Photo: Signature scene from **Pine Lake**: Here is one of the infamous speed-limit signs. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff