

NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE WEEK: Pine Lake

Small DeKalb community rebounds from problems

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CORRECTION: 07/25/00, page A/2: A reference to Tommie Storms in a Sunday Homefinder article was incorrect. Storms is a woman.

When you turn off Rockbridge Road into the small DeKalb County town of **Pine Lake**, it's almost like entering a separate reality. From the harsh glare and heat of the busy highway, you slip into an enclave of trees and greenery. Branches meet overhead, forming a canopy that creates so much shade that residents say the temperature is four to five degrees cooler than just a few yards away on heavily traveled Rockbridge. Drive a little farther down the narrow lanes and you come to the lake that forms the city's center. A few children chase each other on the sandy beach, while others splash away the heat of a summer afternoon.

With 870 residents, **Pine Lake** seems an idyllic spot, yet the town has sparked its share of controversy during recent years. Communication problems between residents and city government led to various disputes. There were allegations of unfair tactics by **Pine Lake** police against some residents. There were allegations of misconduct by a former elected official. And there were widely publicized allegations that the **Pine Lake** police was issuing tickets to African-Americans driving on Rockbridge Road -- the town's southern border -- on a racially biased basis.

But those were the "old days," according to new Mayor Al Fowler, who insists the community is entering a new and greatly improved phase. "This is a softer, kinder, gentler **Pine Lake**," said Fowler, who became mayor last year. "The new **Pine Lake** is a city that is proud of who we are and where we are going. We've inherited a past that wasn't to everyone's liking and we've realized a whole lot needed to be corrected. And we're in the process of doing that. "In March, some former critics of **Pine Lake**'s traffic-ticketing practices said the city had changed for the better. Joy Berry of the Georgia Human Relations Commission said the city had transformed its police department into one that practices "fairness, justice and sensitivity while upholding the law." Revenues from traffic tickets, once **Pine Lake**'s main source of income, have declined sharply since early 1999. To offset the revenue drop, the city has boosted its property tax rate from 7 mills last year to 21 mills in 2000.

Tommie Storms, a resident since 1987 and two-time mayoral candidate, said **Pine Lake** is definitely on the upswing. "We now have an open mayor and trusting city council members," he said. Housing changes in **Pine Lake** also indicate that the community is beginning a turnaround. As recently as 10 years ago, approximately 40 percent of the homes in **Pine Lake** were non-owner occupied, and many homes had been allowed to fall into disrepair. But a recent survey of the city shows new construction or renovations under way on almost every block. People are

adding on, updating and in some cases gutting and starting over. And some interesting new homes are being constructed as well. "Property values are increasing enormously," said Fowler. "The house I bought for \$110,000 in 1996 is now appraised at over \$200,000.

There's been more new construction in the last 18 months than the city has had in the last 20 years. "Sandy Larson, a developer, recently purchased three homes and three lots in the city. She said she was initially "scared away by all the press" about **Pine Lake** but checked out the city anyway. "Once I got past the perceptions into the reality, I was encouraged by the changes here. I'd been looking for houses to buy and fix up, and when I came to **Pine Lake**, it was instant," she said. "It was like walking into a time warp -- the quaintness and eclectic value of the homes, and the lake. I saw a blue heron soaring overhead. "For years I'd wanted to move away from the city to the country, and this is as close as I could get." Larson lives in one of the homes, a cabin, while she's renovating the other two. And she'll soon start construction on three new homes in **Pine Lake**. "I plan to keep the homes in line with the quaintness of the city," she said. "I'll be building homes very much in keeping with the look that conforms to nature rather than having nature conform to me."

Part of the new approach to city government is offering residents more recreational pursuits, Fowler said. To that end, the Mayor's Patrons of the Arts committee has been formed, and it organizes concerts and events that are held in the park surrounding the lake. "The beach house has become the social center of the city," Storms said. "We have concerts, events, hayrides."

Though most people who buy homes in **Pine Lake** intend to make the town their primary residence, there are still a number who, like Marty Griffin, buy weekend getaways in the community -- which, in a way, is only fitting. That's how **Pine Lake** started out. Griffin, a real estate agent who maintains a primary residence in Virginia-Highland and another home in the mountains, said **Pine Lake** came as a pleasant surprise to her. "I was not 100 yards into the city when I thought, 'this is unbelievable,'" she said. "I have a home in the mountains that I haven't been to since October because I'm just too busy to get away." But I can get here easily from Virginia-Highland, and when I'm here, it's like I'm a thousand miles away."

History

Pine Lake began life in the early 1930s as a weekend and summer resort. Built around a man-made lake, one of many constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers during that time, **Pine Lake** was a popular "home-away-from-home" for Atlanta residents who bought vacation residences. Cottages, bungalows, cabins, lake homes -- the blend of styles and materials used for building were eclectic and extensive. It wasn't long before **Pine Lake** began attracting permanent residents and, in 1938, it was incorporated. During recent decades, **Pine Lake** went into a decline. Owner occupancy of homes was down, rentals were up and property values slipped. But the convenience of **Pine Lake's** close-in location, the attraction of its lake and the potential value of its homes have begun to spur a resurgence.

Population 870

ZIP code 30072

Amenities **Lake** for swimming and fishing, Beach house, Walking trail around lake, Lakeside gazebo, Picnic areas, Planned concerts, art festivals, events

Landmarks **Pine Lake**, Stone Mountain

Schools: Rockbridge Elementary, pre-K-5; 404-292-4001

Enrollment, 783; Students per teacher, 20.1; students per computer, 7.1; before/after school care; students in gifted program, 5.6 percent; subsidized lunch, 39.7 percent; ITBS grade equivalency, Grade 3, reading, 3.5; math, 3.7; language, 4.2; social studies, 3.5; science, 3.8; reference materials, 3.7; Grade 5, reading, 5.3; math, 5.3; language, 6.1; social studies, 5.1; science, 5.5; reference materials, 5.3.

Stone Mountain Middle, 6-8; 770-879-8764

Enrollment, 764; students per teacher, 14.7; students per computer, 5.1; students in gifted program, 4.6 percent; subsidized lunch, 57.7 percent; ITBS grade equivalency, Grade 8, reading, 7.1; math, 8; language, 8.3; social studies, 7.7; science, 7.7; reference materials, 8.1.

Stone Mountain High, 9-12; 404-294-5413

Enrollment, 1,289; students per teacher, 19.0; students per computer, 7.3; four foreign languages taught; students in gifted program, 6.4 percent; dropouts, 7.1 percent; subsidized lunch, 37.5 percent; total suspensions, 779; athletic classification, AAAA; percentage passing graduation test on first try, language, 89 percent; math, 81; science, 69; social studies, 76; writing, 87.

AJC school guide offered at a discount

Available soon: The Ultimate Atlanta School Guide 2000 edition will be available Aug. 1. The new, expanded edition of this perennial best seller will include statistics and information on more than 800 public schools in 21 counties in greater Atlanta. Also included is information on more than 100 private schools. A special \$19.95 pre-publication price, including shipping, is good through July 31. To reserve your copy and save \$4 off the \$23.95 regular price, call The Stacks at 404-526-5668 or 1-800-756-4197.

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Photo: Developer Sandy Larson renovated this 1945 cabin in **Pine Lake**. She's renovating two other homes and will start construction on three new ones. / CATHY SEITH / Staff

Photo: Marty Griffin's French country-style weekend home in **Pine Lake** includes two fireplaces and two bedrooms. / CATHY SEITH / Staff

Photo: Fishing and small boats are allowed in the town of **Pine Lake**'s namesake lake. Residents say the town's trees make the area much cooler than nearby areas. / CATHY SEITH / Staff

Photo: The bungalow at 430 Hemlock Drive.

Photo: A cedar rustic home at 493 Spruce Drive.

Photo: The two-story traditional home at 514 Club House Drive.

Graphic: Recent home sales

\$94,500

430 Hemlock Drive. Built on a lot of less than one-half acre, this bungalow was recently renovated and has four bedrooms; two baths; two-story vaulted family room open to stairway;

kitchen with knotty pine cabinets; large rear deck; wooded lot; fireplace in great room; driveway parking. Listed for \$94,900; sold for \$94,500.

\$128,800

493 Spruce Drive. Built on a lot of less than three-quarters acre, this cedar rustic home is 16 years old and has two bedrooms; two baths; split-bedroom plan; sunken master suite with private deck; great room with vaulted ceiling and exposed beams; one-car detached garage. Sold for \$128,800.

\$185,000

514 Club House Drive. Built on a lot of less than one-half acre, this two-story traditional home is new and has three bedrooms; 2 1/2 baths; great room with fireplace; master bath with whirlpool tub and separate shower; master with sitting area and two closets; parking pad. Sold for \$185,000.

Map: PINE LAKE - Getting there

From downtown Atlanta, take I-20 east to I-285 north to the Memorial Drive exit and go right. At Rockbridge Road, turn right; at Club House Drive, turn left into **Pine Lake**.

Graphic: OTHER NEIGHBORHOOD SALES

A sampling of residential transactions in the past 18 months.

Address.....	Sales price
4538 Orchid Drive.....	\$65,000
412 Club House Drive..	\$80,500
4581 Dogwood Road....	\$119,000
452 Hemlock Drive....	\$133,000
439 Spring Drive.....	\$185,000