

Chartering a new course

Pine Lake tries to redirect city management

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The city of **Pine Lake** will implement a new charter, passed by the Legislature this year and effective this week, which shifts the administrative responsibilities from the five-member council to the part-time mayor and two full-time directors of the town of 930 people. Article also describes the form government takes in DeKalb's other municipalities: Avondale Estates, Chamblee, Clarkston, Decatur, Doraville, Lithonia, and Stone Mountain. From the bustle of busy Rockbridge Road, it may not look as if much is happening in the one-square-mile city of **Pine Lake**.

But inside the upper-story quarters of City Hall, officials have given the town's charter a major facelift, more than half a century after its creation.

The new charter, passed by the Legislature this year and effective this week, shifts the administrative responsibilities from the five-member council to the part-time mayor and two full-time directors of the town of 930 people.

Pine Lake and DeKalb County's seven other cities - with populations between 2,450 and 17,350 - sometimes disappear into the shadows of the international city of Atlanta a few miles to the west or into the huge county government that dominates the area.

But the municipalities have their own distinct political identities.

Their power and influence run the gamut, from Decatur, with its \$9.5 million budget and independent school system to Lithonia, where the City Council has to approve fixing Town Hall's heater in the winter.

Fifty-four years ago, **Pine Lake** was founded as a resort community where Atlantans could enjoy nature on the banks of a manmade 12-acre lake.

In the late 1930s, the resort town came alive in the summer months, and the city charter reflected the town's seasonal existence, said **Pine Lake** Mayor Neil Copeland.

"There weren't that many year-round residents, so the government didn't need to be year-round," he said.

In the old charter, each council member was charged with running a department, including establishing its budget. In reality, Mayor Copeland said, the town hasn't been run like that for years. The refurbished charter "brings the government on paper up to par with its function," the mayor said.

Under the new charter, in which the city will go to a strong mayor-weak council form of government, the council retains its legislative powers while the mayor makes most of the day-to-day decisions in running the city.

Two newly established director positions will divide the administration of the city's various departments, including its four-man police force, public works crew and finance department. Most of DeKalb's eight municipalities are run by part-time elected officials with the help of an administrative staff or a professional full-time city manager.

Decatur, the largest DeKalb city with 17,350 residents, is run on a day-to-day basis by City Manager Curtis Branscome, who was hired almost 20 years ago.

"The City Commission defines what is going to be done, and it's the city manager's responsibility to do it," said Mr. Branscome, who drafts the annual budget, appoints department heads and generally does the hiring for the city.

The city's part-time elected officials will call or drop by City Hall periodically, but they do not interfere in daily operations, he said.

"They do their work in policy-making. They don't say, 'Do it this way or that way,' which is most helpful," Mr. Branscome said.

Chamblee Mayor Johnson "Dub" Brown, one of only two full-time mayors in DeKalb, describes his job as being an elected chief executive officer. But he remembers a time when he was more in charge.

"The mayor used to do the hiring and the firing. [The City Council] has diluted the power of the mayor somewhat," said Mayor Brown, referring to the council's decision last year to create a personnel committee to oversee employee issues.

Clarkston's part-time Mayor Ernest Carroll, a retired lab supervisor for Emory University Dental School, said he works at City Hall three or four days a week.

The city's two main departments, police and administration, are run by full-time employees, the police chief and the city clerk, respectively.

"I rely on them a great deal," said Mayor Carroll, who was elected to the post last year after serving on the council for a decade.

If there are decisions that can't wait for the next scheduled council meeting, Mayor Carroll said, he polls each of the six councilmen.

"As a council member, if I had a problem, I could take it to the mayor and discuss it with him. But as mayor, if I have a problem, I have decisions to make that must be made immediately.

In Avondale Estates, the city manager, treasurer and the building official are responsible for implementing policy determined by the five-member Board of City Commissioners.

With a population of only 2,500, Avondale Estates officials pride themselves on keeping close contact with residents' problems.

For instance, Commissioner Bill Randolph soon will be leading a delegation of property owners appealing their DeKalb County property assessments in a meeting with county tax officials.

"One of the advantages we have in Avondale, being small, is that we're homogenous in our population. If there's a major issue that concerns one [resident], it usually concerns all of our residents," Mayor John W. Lawson said.

In Lithonia, part-time Mayor Al Venable has had to reduce the time he spends at City Hall since he changed shifts in his regular job.

Assistant City Clerk Jan Horne says there isn't much that goes on in the east DeKalb city of 2,450 that can't wait until the next council meeting - except for the time when the heater broke down and it was 30 degrees outside.

"It was like \$1,000 worth of work," she said. "I called all the council members to get approval from them to get it fixed. Big things aren't done without approval from the council."

A couple of years ago, Stone Mountain officials were desperately looking for a candidate to fill the full-time city manager's position. Part-time Mayor Jane Rhodes says she can sleep at night since the City Council hired Bob Booth in 1989.

The city consistently has lowered the tax rate in the past few years, but Mr. Booth says the cost of running the city of about 6,000 residents is rising.

Doraville Mayor Gene Lively, a full-time elected official, said a big part of his job is overseeing maintenance work.

Alone, he can approve an expense up to \$2,000, if necessary, he said. For expenses over that amount, however, he usually polls the council.

He credits the department heads in helping him run the city of 7,800.

"If it's a quick decision they have to make," the mayor said, "we stand behind them."

Color photo: Mayor Neil Copeland gazes over **Pine Lake**, from which the city takes its name / Nick Arroyo / Staff

Chart: Salaries of local officials

- Avondale Estates:

Part-time mayor, \$100/year

4-member commission, \$50/year

Full-time city manager, \$50,500

(Commissioners have waived compensation in recent years.) - Chamblee:

Full-time mayor, \$30,368/ year

5-member council, \$262.50/month

- Clarkston:

Part-time mayor, \$5,000/year

6-member council, \$2,500/year

- Decatur:

Part-time mayor, \$200/month 4-member commission, \$25 to \$50/month Full-time city manager, \$72,384/year.

- Doraville:

Full-time mayor, \$42,500/year

6-member council, \$300/month

- Lithonia:

Part-time mayor, \$100/mo., \$200/mo. expenses

5-member council, \$50/mo., \$120/mo. expenses.

- **Pine Lake:**

Part-time, volunteer mayor

5-member volunteer council

(New charter would allow compensation)

- Stone Mountain:

Part-time mayor, \$300/month

6-member, \$75/month

Full-time city manager, \$40,000