

Pine Lake mayor resigns post, cites tensions with City Council

BYLINE: STANFORD, DUANE D **Duane D. Stanford** STAFF WRITER DeKalb

DATE: March 24, 1994

PUBLICATION: The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution **EDITION:** The Atlanta Journal Constitution

SECTION: EXTRA

PAGE: A/8

Neil Copeland's political career will end much as it started in 1978.

It was then that he was elected to the **Pine Lake** City Council by special election to complete the term of a resigning member. By the close of May, Copeland too will step down in midterm as the city's mayor, leaving behind the legacy of a more streamlined city government.

Copeland said irreconcilable differences between he and a primarily new City Council colored his decision to resign from the part-time post.

"For some time now, it has been obvious to me that most of you disagree with me about the best way to govern our city," wrote Copeland in a March 14 letter to council members. "Those disagreements have led to ill will and even physical confrontations that are counterproductive both to good government and harmony among the city's elected officials."

Copeland said tensions have centered around desires by several council members to be more active in the day-to-day operations of the city. In his view, the City Council should concentrate on policy and legislative issues while allowing administrative issues to be fleshed out by the mayor (chief administrator) and City Hall officials.

Councilwoman Judy Weisberg agrees that this has been a primary source of tension, although she disagrees that the differences were irreconcilable.

"I feel like he has been helpful in establishing a solidified police department and in getting some organization needs of the city worked out," said Weisberg. "But it's a new chapter and . . . I think that we have an enthusiastic council and a council that is willing to roll up its sleeves and get into some issues."

Entering the **Pine Lake** political arena in 1978, Copeland served on the council until 1979 when he was elected to his first term as mayor. During this three-year stint, Copeland also served a year as president of the DeKalb Municipal Association (DMA).

Copeland was elected to his second term as Mayor in 1988, after dropping out of politics for six years, and he won a third term in 1991 which would have ended in December of 1995. He served again as DMA president in 1990 and he recently struggled through the issue of double taxation in DeKalb County on the Ad Valorem Tax Study Commission.

"My mission as [mayor] was to organize things so that they would not be as political," said Copeland, "I wanted to standardize procedures to make them more modern."

Copeland spearheaded efforts to create a pay and classification plan for city employees, to publish a city personnel policy manual, and to formalize a standard operating procedure for the police department.

"These things weren't done in a vacuum," admits Copeland. "I had a lot of good help. All I did was try to play the leader."

Though tensions have mounted since last November, the council was surprised to hear Copeland's resignation announcement at their March meeting.

"I had no idea that he was making that decision until he read the letter," said recently elected Councilwoman Sharon Keener. "I wish it could have worked out."

Mayor Pro-tem Linda Unger will take over as interim mayor on April 1. Weisberg, who may run for the mayoral role herself, says the city will hold a special election as soon as possible and she expects a smooth mayoral transition.

Photo: Neil Copeland Mayor says he could not get along with the City Council.