

Pine Lake: Urban Hideaway
Resort-turned-depressed community making a comeback

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British photographer Peter Beney this week will celebrate one year as a resident of **Pine Lake**, a quaint community tucked away off Rockbridge Road. "I came out to visit a friend and I fell in love with it," Beney said. "I knew this was the place to call home. "That says a lot for a man who has traveled the world over, photographing major cities for his best-selling coffee table books including, "Atlanta, A Brave and Beautiful City. "Three things, Beney said, served to hook, line and sink him into the community that encircles a lake and private beach. "I decided to move here because one, it's handy to town; two, the homes are incredibly cheap, and three, the lake is breathtaking. I find I spend at least an hour at this lake every day."

Those unofficial criteria apparently served as the qualifying factors for the other 900 or so residents of this bedroom community that measures less than a mile in length. With Rockbridge Road as its major thoroughfare, the entire city is discreetly sandwiched between Memorial Drive and Hairston Road. And homeowners appear unanimous in one resident's opinion of it: "You turn off Rockbridge Road and step back 30 years in time." **Pine** Lakers cherish a rare commodity in an urban area: peace and quiet. "It's hard to believe we're this close to Memorial Drive," said Mary Stuckey, first lady of the city. "Once inside, all you hear is quiet. "Inside, as visitors will come to learn, is in reference to the community, not one's actual home. But as far as residents are concerned, it's one and the same.

"This is a very tight-knit group," said Althea Sumpter, a resident of two years. A university television and film professor, Sumpter said a large majority of people move to **Pine Lake** because they have friends there. "The allure, of course, is the area itself; it's filled with so much natural beauty. We have the lake, the woods and the peacefulness," she said. Affordability contributes to peace of mind. The average sale price for homes in 1992-93, according to the Magellan Information Service Corp., was \$47,167. Bruce Bartow, **Pine Lake** Neighborhood Association president, said prices have escalated since then. "Two years ago, the average selling price was \$47,000; now you'd be hard-pressed to buy a home in the mid-70s," said Bartow, a designer and resident of 15 years.

The allure of **Pine Lake** is apparently the same as it was when it was chartered in December 1937. The community, blanketed with a forest view, lake and spaciousness, was a one-time resort that later deteriorated, said City Administrator Jim Thomas. "Because the area attracted so many people who weren't looking to become long-term property owners, they didn't make an investment in the community," Thomas said. "So, it basically became downtrodden and a bad place to be 15 years ago."

Bartow agreed, citing 40 percent of the homes as rental properties as recently as five years ago. "To put it bluntly," Bartow said, "we had a lot of slumlords, run-down homes and junk cars." How, then, did this resort-turned-depressed community a dubbed the speed trap of DeKalb County a evolve into its new claim as a haven for artists and those up-and-coming? "Under the new administration, all of this is being booting out. We're starting to get people who are seriously looking at the properties as long-term investments," Bartow said. Thomas agreed. "We've had many governments, but last year was the first major attempt to clean up this place," he said.

The new administration is that of Mayor Mike Stuckey, longtime politician and a resident of 10 years. Rose Parsons is mayor pro-tem. With an operating budget of approximately \$700,000, which includes grant money, Stuckey and the council put forth steps to reclaim the community. "A lot of the homes were abandoned and burned out," Stuckey said. "We identified who the owners were, cleaned them up and got rid of all the junk cars. I just wouldn't take no for an answer." The mayor said that in many cases the abandoned cottage homes were owned by people who didn't live in **Pine Lake**. Additionally, **Pine Lake** has been cited two years in a row as the safest city in DeKalb County, the mayor said. "My philosophy is, people should be glad with how long they got away with it, but there's a new sheriff in town," Stuckey said. The city administrator agreed.

"**Pine Lake** used to be perceived as the depressed area that the county didn't have to pay attention to," Thomas said. "I find it interesting that the county has adopted some of the same policies that we have. I now see things that we started doing in 1994 that others are following." He continued, "Slowly but surely we're being taken a lot more seriously." In a town still dubbed a speed trap, slowly is a pretty safe way to proceed.

Photo: **Pine** Lakers: Residents (from left, standing) Jim Thomas, Peter Beney, Emily Newman, Richard Newman, Richard Cecil, Judith Weisberg Thomas and Althea Sumpter, and (sitting) Mayor Mike Stuckey, Mary Stuckey, Mayor Pro-tem Rose Parsons and her son, Warren Parsons, gather at the water's edge. / Leita Cowart / Special