

## **Pine Lake officials can't deny right to free speech**

**BYLINE:** Staff

**DATE:** May 7, 1999

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

**EDITION:** Final; The Atlanta Journal

**SECTION:** Editorial

**PAGE:** A22

DON'T GIVE a fellow citizen good advice in **Pine Lake**. Be careful in this sparse town of 900 how you exercise your constitutional right to free speech. They'll threaten to charge you with a felony. That's where Darryl Dorton and Douglas Coffey stand for informing citizens of their legal rights. **Pine Lake** -- so tiny it polices only three-tenths of a mile of a two-lane road -- has been financing City Hall on the backs of motorists. Seventy-two percent of the town's \$1.2 million in annual revenue comes from fines, mostly from that bit of road. Nearby residents of Stone Mountain know the area's stalked by traffic police, so they crawl along Rockbridge Road, only to be stopped for petty offenses.

Dorton and Coffey have picketed the area to stop what they allege is racial harassment, and of late they've outsmarted City Hall by informing ticketed citizens that they can have their cases transferred to DeKalb State Court from **Pine Lake** Municipal Court. That has hit the city in the pocketbook, costing **Pine Lake** \$25,000 in lost fines in March alone. The city, with the aid of Municipal Court Judge Alan Mullinax, is fighting back, threatening to hold the pair in contempt of court for practicing law without a license, and most recently, threatening to charge them with a felony, barratry, which is stirring up groundless actions and improperly offering legal assistance.

Now, we know **Pine Lake** doesn't want anybody interfering. But Dorton and Coffey commit a crime by informing citizens of their legal options no more than Clark Howard does on his radio show. Says DeKalb District Attorney J. Tom Morgan, "It's perfectly legal to tell people what their rights are. "Instead of trying to scare citizens out of exercising their rights, we'd suggest **Pine Lake** find another source of revenue.

Photo: Making themselves clear: Darryl Dorton (left) and Douglas Coffey express their opinions about **Pine Lake**'s tactics to motorists passing on Rockbridge Road. / CATHY SEITH / Staff