

Editorials - Bucking Pine Lake's cash cow

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One-industry towns tend to be very protective of the business that pays the bills. And in **Pine Lake**, population 900, that industry happens to be the fleecing of motorists who pass through the tiny town along a three-tenths-mile stretch of Rockbridge Road east of Decatur. Last year, **Pine Lake**'s nine-person police force wrote enough traffic tickets to generate almost \$1,000 in revenue for each man, woman and child in the little municipality. That money went straight into the city coffers, where it covered 72 percent of the town's budget. That's a scandalous abuse of law-enforcement power, and state officials ought to look into ways of ending the scam.

Two brave citizens, Darryl Dorton and Douglas Coffey, are already doing their part. They've been standing outside **Pine Lake**'s traffic court, advising motorists who are coming in to pay their tickets that they have an alternative to the city's shakedown racket. If the motorists switch their cases to DeKalb County State Court, they're told, the revenue goes to the county instead of **Pine Lake**. In March alone, that civil protest cost **Pine Lake** \$25,000. And boy, did that make the **Pine Lake** machine angry. "They're breaking me," the **Pine Lake** police chief has whined. "If this keeps up, I can't pay my force. We write the ticket and the state court keeps it. We don't get a dime."

Even the local judiciary has pitched in to help save the town's main industry. **Pine Lake** Municipal Court Judge Alan Mullinax first threatened to charge Dorton and Coffey with a misdemeanor of practicing law without a license. That was a silly effort to intimidate the men out of their constitutional right to free speech, but silliness soon graduated to absurdity. **Pine Lake** officials now warn that they may charge Dorton and Coffey with the felony of "barratry," punishable by a fine of up to \$5,000 and up to five years in prison. State law defines barratry as "excit(ing) and stir(ring) up groundless actions in the courts or quarrels in administrative proceedings." However, if anyone is guilty of stirring up groundless actions in the courts, it would seem to be the officials of **Pine Lake**. Dorton and Coffey are guilty only of using their constitutional rights to challenge abusive government, and they ought to be thanked for that.