

Pine Lake asks state for bailout

Mayor seeks \$200,000 after cutting traffic ticket revenue

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CORRECTION: 10/27/99, Page A/2: **Pine Lake:** In some editions, a Local News article about **Pine Lake** contained some incorrect figures about population, traffic tickets, revenue and the budget. **Pine Lake's** U.S. Census Bureau population is 815. In January and February, 1,328 tickets were written, and 378 were written in August and September. The 1999 budget was revised down to \$874,500 and as of Sept. 30, **Pine Lake** had collected \$497,100 in revenue and needed \$125,800 per month for the rest of the year to meet its budget.

Pine Lake Mayor Al Fowler's goal is simple, yet Herculean: "I'm here for one purpose," he says matter-of-factly. "To save the city." A retail manager by trade, Fowler might need to be part magician because he has to make some grave financial problems disappear. **Pine Lake** gained notoriety this year for living off an aggressive traffic ticketing policy and is suffering from "severe debt" and "is barely able to meet the payroll and cover utilities," Fowler said in an application for emergency grant funds from the governor's office.

"We are faced with some hard realities," Fowler said in a Sept. 28 letter to Gov. Roy Barnes' office, seeking a \$200,000 emergency grant, which is needed to avert a foreseen budget shortfall this year. "Our chief of police has resigned and with only four officers, we are not operating comfortably with the optimum safety and efficiency. Further, past indiscretions and mismanagement have left **Pine Lake** with severe debt." A governor's aide said an average emergency grant is between \$5,000 and \$10,000. "We are searching for new revenue sources and are proposing a major millage rate increase in Jan. 2000," Fowler states in the letter. The city this year will receive \$80,000 in property taxes on a millage rate of 9. City officials plan to double that rate and then hope to gain even more revenue as home assessments increase. Property values in the tree-lined, one-time vacation town have skyrocketed as homebuyers look for a safe, homey community with a yesteryear feel. The city next week will sponsor a Halloween hay ride near the lake.

A bump on the road to Stone Mountain, **Pine Lake**, population 850, became infamous this year after it planned to raise three-quarters of its \$1.1 million budget from ticketing, a far greater percentage than any other Georgia town. Almost all tickets are to out-of-towners driving along a 1,500-foot stretch of Rockbridge Road bordering the town. Reacting to perpetual protesters on Rockbridge, charges of racism, a firestorm of public criticism and media scrutiny, Fowler vowed to create a "kinder and gentler" city. He slashed the police force from 10 officers to four, curbed the number of traffic stops and cut the city's ticket fine structure. With those changes, the revenue gravy train -- which allowed **Pine Lake** to refurbish its beach house and buy a truck to vacuum residents' leaves -- came to an end. The buying spree also included new patrol cars, a new dump truck and a bungalow to house the police department. The overhead was crushing.

"That was looming to knock us in the head; if it didn't happen when it did, it would have happened later," said Fowler, sitting in a sparse basement office at City Hall vacated by Police Chief Mac McGlamery, who resigned in August, as the police force he built was dissipating. "My job is rebuilding public trust.

We've had a physical renaissance with people rebuilding homes here. Now we're undertaking an ethical renaissance. We want to show we can live within our means." Although the city has made some cuts, Fowler in an interview said the city hopes to keep the house it bought for the police department. The city valued it at \$116,000. The city did sell one of its two drug dogs, Marcos, for \$7,000. The 1999 budget was revised downward 23 percent, from \$1,132,200 to \$874,000. But even with that reduction, it appears **Pine Lake** will end the year woefully short of money. As of Sept. 30, **Pine Lake** had collected \$497,000 in revenue, meaning it needs \$125,000 per month the rest of the year. The city has had barely \$120,000 in revenue the past three months. And **Pine Lake** is \$92,000 past due in paying bills ranging from Jiffy Lube to Georgia Power to the state's workers' compensation fund.

Aside from tax increases and the grant requests, Fowler has approached some "founding fathers" about donating money in exchange for naming the park or community center after them. Fowler, a **Pine Lake** resident of four years, came to the forefront this January as the councilman who led the investigation that ran former Mayor Michael Stuckey out of office on charges of spending city funds without authorization. Stuckey says the charges -- dinners at restaurants and purchasing video equipment -- are politically motivated. "There's not one shred of evidence I did anything illegal," said Stuckey. Fowler, 52, was mayor just a few weeks when protesters clogged the city's revenue stream by urging motorists to transfer their cases from municipal court to DeKalb County state court. When that is done, the county, not the city, gets the fines. **Pine Lake** court fines dropped from \$64,499 in February to \$20,451 in March.

The drop in fine revenue since then has been stunning. In the first two months of 1999, **Pine Lake** generated nearly \$112,000 in fines and wrote 1,288 tickets. In August and September, it generated barely \$16,000 and wrote 352 tickets. Protesters claimed the traffic enforcement, which targeted motorists with paper tags and out-of-date tags, was heavy-handed and focused on black drivers. **Pine Lake** is almost entirely white while the surrounding area is predominantly black. Daryl Dorton, leader of the protests, claims "things have not changed in **Pine Lake**." He said that **Pine Lake** squad cars still sit on Rockbridge monitoring traffic, even though Fowler promised they would patrol the road but not sit and wait. Fowler himself had termed that stretch of road a "blue light armada," but says the practice has been halted.

Dorton and other protesters last week returned to the city's municipal court, after a several-month hiatus, in an effort to sway ticketed motorists from paying their fines in **Pine Lake**.

"We know they can't do the right thing and continue as a city; they can't live without that revenue," said Dorton. He still sees race as the motivation: "Instead of hiring security guards to protect them from the black people -- I'll be blunt -- they have a police force to do it." District Attorney J. Tom Morgan investigated the traffic stops and determined that they were a "cash cow" but not targeted toward black motorists, nor did police employ a pattern of illegal stops.

Dorton and others have pushed for **Pine Lake**'s charter to be dissolved by the state Legislature, and a bill was introduced this spring. "But the legislators are softening somewhat," he acknowledged. "I assumed it was all quiet," said state Rep. Arnold Ragas, who represented Dorton at a hearing when he was held in contempt of court by the former **Pine Lake** municipal judge. Stuckey takes credit for turning the city into a desirable destination. He said the stepped-up policing and the high fines -- \$500 for tag violations "were never about the money. It was about stopping crime. "My family pays taxes; why shouldn't everyone else?" said Stuckey. "We were just being up front about it. We weren't afraid to ticket. They caved in."

"I can't imagine that they cowered under white guilt and let this happen," said Althea Sumpter, a former **Pine Lake** city councilwoman, who is black and supported Stuckey and the hard-nosed ticketing policy. **Pine Lake** citizens, who overwhelmingly supported the police presence on Rockbridge and the aggressive ticketing, seemed resigned to paying more property taxes. "We have to decide what kind of services we're going to need and how to support it," said Greg Creech, a former civic association president. "Most citizens are certainly willing for an increase. It seems inevitable. "Creech said the ticketing controversy and the ensuing publicity "made us closer; it made us more resilient"...."A lot of citizens felt like we were kicked in the stomach," said Creech. "There's a sense of 'let's move on.' "

Bruce Bartow, who owns and renovates real estate in **Pine Lake** and was a founder of the city's civic organization, agreed. And oddly, the supposedly negative publicity has helped spur interest in the city from potential homebuyers, he said. "People who saw all that on TV saw something else. They said, 'Here's a safe city,' " said Bartow.

Photo: Under the gun: **Pine Lake** Mayor Al Fowler is trying to pick up the pieces after a controversy over excessive traffic ticketing by local police. He said a stretch of road where many motorists were ticketed looked like a "blue light armada."/ JOHN SPINK / Staff

Map: PINE LAKE

Map pinpoints city of **Pine Lake** in DeKalb County, showing the city's streets; inset map of metro Atlanta locates the area shown on the larger map./ Staff