

Discord in Pine Lake Mayor-council conflict mars city's image makeover

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DATE: January 24, 2002

PUBLICATION: Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

EDITION: Home; The Atlanta Journal Constitution

SECTION: DeKalb

PAGE: JA1

Depending on your point of view, **Pine Lake** is DeKalb County's answer to Twin Peaks or Cicely, Alaska, of "Northern Exposure." But in recent days the quirky little hamlet of 658 people in the center of the county has perhaps more closely resembled Peyton Place. Allegations of scandal have disrupted the bucolic peacefulness of a cul-de-sac community that looks more like a decaying lake resort than a town. City Council members are calling for the mayor's head over charges he misappropriated public money. Supporters of the mayor mutter that a cabal of counter-reformationists is seeking to restore the unscrupulous revenue-producing, speed-trap practices of an old regime. Others merely hang their heads in dismay at the prospect of bad publicity returning to **Pine Lake**. "What's so sad is that all these people who are fighting now used to be friends. And now we don't even speak," said Janis Lang, holding back tears. Lang, a supporter of the mayor, moved to **Pine Lake** in 1999, the same year the town was stung by complaints that its police department was harassing motorists on the short stretch of Rockbridge Road that runs through town.

News reports that the town had built its \$1.2 million budget mostly on traffic fines led to protests from African-American activists that the predominantly white city government was preying on black motorists for extra revenue. DeKalb District Attorney J. Tom Morgan launched a four-month probe of the city government. But he concluded that, while **Pine Lake**'s ticketing policies could be considered a "cash cow," they were neither racially motivated nor illegal. The town's newly elected mayor, Al Fowler, resolved to cut its addiction to traffic fines. It's been a difficult withdrawal. Reducing traffic fines cut the town's budget nearly in half. Property taxes were increased and the city went to the state for a bailout. At the same time, the town was undergoing a renaissance as new homeowners, particularly gay men and lesbian home buyers, turned the town into an eclectic mix of young and old folks. Fowler is the only openly gay mayor in the state.

Property values skyrocketed and **Pine Lake** was flooded with renovation and new homebuilding. In a city where, seven years ago, 40 percent of the property was inhabited by renters, now virtually all of it is owner-occupied. New upper-scale eateries are opening in the town's tiny commercial stretch. The city's beach house and clubhouse regularly feature local art exhibits and music. But the recent political unpleasantness has clouded some of the successes. Last week the City Council voted to hold an "investigative hearing" of Fowler after a raucous meeting, which the mayor first sought to disband over a lawyer's complaint the new City Council had taken office via an illegal election.

The eight-point investigation of the mayor includes allegations he improperly used his city credit card for personal expenses and that he didn't get council approval for vendor contracts he signed. Perhaps the most serious charge is that he improperly gave a \$3,000 gift to a city employee and

then asked another employee to hide records of the gift. "I feel that Al Fowler is running a government the city residents can't afford," said Councilwoman Vicky McCall. Supporters of the mayor say the accusations are trumped up, including the \$3,000 gift, which Lang called a bonus to a city employee who put in heavy overtime finding temporary housing for the police department when the station caught fire. Fowler opponents, his supporters say, long for the days when the city was flush with traffic citation cash. For his part, Fowler would only say, "I've done everything in my power to be ethical, upfront and honest." It's not clear how this dispute will be resolved. Morgan said he's not interested in another **Pine Lake** investigation. The city will hold its investigative hearing in late January or early February. But residents on both sides say they'll get past it. "I'm very positive this city can go forward and survive," said McCall.

Photo: City Councilwoman Vicky McCall said **Pine Lake** Mayor Al Fowler is "running a government the city residents can't afford." / RENEE HANNANS / Staff

Photo: **Pine Lake** Mayor Al Fowler is the subject of an eight-point City Council "investigative hearing" into allegations of financial impropriety. "I've done everything in my power to be ethical, upfront and honest," he said. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff