

Pine Lake residents review budget woes

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Pine Lake officials, who recently curtailed police patrols after the city lost its liability insurance, met with residents Thursday night to get suggestions on cutting services.

The ideas discussed by leaders of this central DeKalb County municipality included reducing garbage pickup from once a week to once every other week; leasing some city buildings, and contracting with other cities to provide services. "We want to turn the screws a little tighter," explained Greg Zarus, who was elected mayor in August.

About 30 residents attended the two-hour meeting in the city's clubhouse, where they reviewed spreadsheets that showed, in addition to its insurance woes, **Pine Lake** has debts above \$200,000. The debts were blamed on poor bookkeeping and dwindling revenues. The city's current budget is \$440,000. Most of the residents seemed willing to help the city through its fiscal problems, offering to volunteer in public works projects or to answer telephones at City Hall. Others wondered how the city fell into its current financial state.

Bruce Bartow, a prominent **Pine Lake** property owner and community leader, worries that the current problems could prompt state lawmakers to dissolve **Pine Lake**. "When poor decisions are made in small communities, it could have dramatic consequences, not excluding the loss of the city charter," he said. Karen Bernheimer, who has lived in **Pine Lake** for 19 years, said she was encouraged the city was now on the right track. "I think things are going to get better," she said.

Pine Lake is not required to have liability insurance. To reduce any risks of lawsuits, the city's police force is currently doing "limited" patrols to reduce the time they're on the road, Zarus said. The mayor said he has had discussions with DeKalb County government to cover **Pine Lake** with liability insurance. **Pine Lake**, like many metro Atlanta communities, is facing significant financial difficulties. In August, the Georgia Intergovernmental Risk Management Agency dropped **Pine Lake** from its insurance policy after paying \$184,747 in 12 separate claims since May 1999. The agency considered **Pine Lake** a bad risk. The current problems are the latest unwelcome news for the community of about 700 residents two miles west of Stone Mountain.

In 1999, **Pine Lake** was stung by news reports that the city built its budget mostly on traffic fines. That led to protests from African-American activists that the predominantly white city government unfairly targeted black motorists. In February, City Council members voted to remove Mayor Al Fowler from office after allegations of financial wrongdoing.