

**Town aims to retain its charms
Tiny Pine Lake faces growth, seeks wise path**

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Pine Lake is like a Norman Rockwell painting. Stone walls and overarching oaks. Sun glittering off the sand along a scenic lake. A bluegrass band playing at the club house on Friday evenings. Resident artists like Dede Spitz decorating their yards with their own creations. So how do you keep this atmosphere -- a rarity in sprawling Atlanta -- from disappearing? That's the million-dollar question in the town of about 650 people between Memorial Drive and Rockbridge Road in central DeKalb County. Development is encroaching, with bigger houses and more people. City officials are working on a long-term plan to guide development that will preserve **Pine Lake's** ambience while providing for the growth the city needs.

"Old-timers kept it insular, exclusionary," said Mayor Greg Zarus. "We are trying to court more commercial development. "Some elements of the plan:

- A call for "pedestrian connectivity," such as a hike-and-bike connection with the PATH trail that connects Stone Mountain and downtown Atlanta.
- Develop a viable commercial district on busy Rockbridge Road, which has daily traffic of about 20,000. Officials want to see the street become a destination point like Ponce de Leon in downtown Decatur. "If I can walk up there [to Rockbridge] for a dinner, I would love it," Zarus said.
- Help businesses make better use of their existing properties, according to a comprehensive plan released in March. But in the city, only 6 acres are available on which to develop new businesses. Annexation is a crucial option. "There is a need for more property to sustain the growth along the business corridor," the report said.

When some metro Atlanta residents hear **Pine Lake**, they may think "speed trap." A few years ago, news reports that the town had built its \$1.2 million budget mostly on traffic fines led to protests from African-Americans that the city was preying on black motorists driving through. An investigation by the district attorney concluded that while **Pine Lake's** ticketing policies could be considered a "cash cow," they were neither racially motivated nor illegal. Now officials say property taxes and grants make up most of the city's budget. **Pine Lake** prides itself on diversity and a reputation for tolerance. Among Georgia cities, according to the Census Bureau, **Pine Lake** has the highest percentage of households in which unmarried partners reside, often used as a measure of gay and lesbian residents. The city's previous mayor, Al Fowler, was gay. Spitz, 66, has lived in **Pine Lake** for 17 years. She said that even as the town grows, she hopes it retains its small-town feel. "I think people who come here want a casual kind of life," she said. "People are friendly. You can get to know people."

Photo

RENEE HANNANS HENRY / Staff

"I think people who come here want a casual kind of life," says folk artist Dede Spitz, who has lived in **Pine Lake** for 17 years.

Photo