

City trend leaves others out

Posted: 4:00 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 2, 2014

BY LEE MAY

Cityhood is not inherently a bad thing. There have been cities in DeKalb County since 1822.

It is a fundamental right for citizens to be able to choose more government and pay a premium for heightened levels of service.

The trouble is, under current Georgia law, cities can be created or expanded in a way that unfairly impacts service levels for others outside of these arbitrarily drawn boundaries.

Governments are funded primarily through property taxes and licensing fees. As it currently stands, proposed cities are strategically picking the county's most valuable assets to ensure their sustainability. This cherry picking decreases the county's financial ability to maintain service delivery for all of DeKalb. All citizens of DeKalb suffer financially as it relates to service delivery when this occurs.

When choice areas are drawn into cities, the city gets a portion of the property taxes and all of the licensing and fees — to the exclusion of residents who were left outside city boundaries. This means their tax burdens go up, or their service levels go down, or both. They suffer in this process, and they don't get to vote on it.

Furthermore, cities are able to shirk the historical pension and health care obligations of employees who served the area before incorporation, shifting that cost to unincorporated residents.

For example, a police officer who served unincorporated Brookhaven for 30 years retires. When Brookhaven incorporated, residents inside city limits were no longer obligated to fulfill retirement benefits to this worker, even though he served their community. That cost was shifted to unincorporated residents.

If the trend continues and Tucker, Lakeside, Briarcliff and Stonecrest all become cities, millions of DeKalb's current pension obligations will be shifted from the people who have benefited from county services to citizens the new cities left behind.

That's not fair.

DeKalb lost about \$18 million each year with the creation of Dunwoody and about \$25 million with Brookhaven. The recent Chamblee annexation was another multi-million-dollar hit for the county, but at least Chamblee embraced all surrounding residents. These new Chamblee residents were the ones excluded from the creation of Brookhaven the year before.

To be clear, if people want to pay higher taxes for a local government, I support that. If cities want to form in a manner that is fair to both the cities and county, I support that, too.

But at the moment, affluent enclaves have the advantage of money and power over those of lesser means. This is why I am joining the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia in calling for a moratorium on the creation of new

cities until we can find an equitable manner to distribute the population and cost obligations of newly created cities with counties.

I am asking the Georgia General Assembly to refrain from any annexations and incorporations in DeKalb for three years, so we can reach a consensus on a fair and equitable process of municipal expansion that will mutually benefit all citizens, or at least not cause harm to one part of the county to help another.

I would hope all counties statewide would take heed.

The same law that allows cities to form in DeKalb is the same law that will adversely affect you, so please take note.

Lee May is DeKalb County's interim CEO.