

Residents denied destiny

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During the past year, thousands of neighbors have joined the Lakeside City Alliance at more than 70 community meetings regarding the possibility of cityhood for our area of north-central DeKalb County. The feedback has been astounding. Residents have expressed an overwhelming desire for a local control of their government — particularly with a greater police presence.

With the 2014 session fast approaching, the Georgia Legislature will soon consider these calls from our neighbors for local governance. It will hear a proposal by state Sen. Fran Millar for a May 2014 referendum creating Georgia's

The University of Georgia recently concluded a five-month study finding that Lakeside would not only be fiscally sound, but would operate without a property tax increase and with substantial annual surpluses.

The study found the new city would generate \$35.8 million a year in revenue, while the annual cost of providing city services would require about \$29.9 million. The yearly, \$5.9 million surplus could be used for paving new roads, purchasing new parkland, adding police officers as needed, or even a potential tax cut.

The study determined that the new city could employ at least 81 police officers to patrol Lakeside's 20 square miles, an area that encompasses local landmarks such as Mercer University, the Toco Hill shopping center and Northlake Mall.

Unfortunately, the response from the DeKalb establishment to calls for a cityhood referendum has been the same as it was with past proposals to establish the cities of Brookhaven and Dunwoody: "Let's wait."

To understand why our neighbors are concerned with this response, consider what has changed for Dunwoody residents since its incorporation four years ago. The county has increased its tax millage rate for city services in unincorporated areas from 3.04 to 4.76. In contrast, Dunwoody has run annual surpluses of \$1 million to \$2 million with a much lower millage rate of 2.74 — all while providing what many Dunwoody residents believe to be higher-quality city services including police, parks and public works.

We hear time and again that citizens are frustrated with DeKalb's current leadership asking for more time to turn things around while county governance continues to deteriorate. We hear complaints about county corruption and incompetence. We are asked in disbelief how the same county politicians who have been part of the problem can now ask state lawmakers for a moratorium on new cities, while offering nothing but platitudes in exchange.

We also hear these concerns: DeKalb CEO Burrell Ellis will soon stand trial on extortion and conspiracy charges; police response times to the rising number of burglaries are unacceptable; the run of potholes throughout our neighborhoods seems endless; and the county appears to be more focused on retaining its 5,500 employees instead of providing taxpayers with a lean and effective government.

Citizens recently learned that interim CEO Lee May proposed a pay raise for employees while continuing to ignore a 2010 Georgia State University county-commissioned report calling for a nearly 17 percent reduction in the county workforce — including a 33-percent reduction in the CEO's office and a 30-percent reduction in the commissioners' staff.

To make matters worse, some other DeKalb lawmakers, bent on obstructing the cityhood process, will introduce illusory plans for other cities in our area during the upcoming legislative session. These plans will be offered solely to create the illusion of confusion among voters. Anti-city politicians hope to continue their habitual efforts to deprive local residents of the opportunity to determine their own destiny, just as they attempted with their votes against allowing citizens to decide on the formation of Brookhaven or Dunwoody.

Residents of the Lakeside community hope, however, that the rest of the Legislature will continue its demonstrated record of supporting the right of citizens to self-determination. The residents of Lakeside deserve the opportunity to set their own course for the future.

Mary Kay Woodworth is chairman of the Lakeside City Alliance. Kevin Levitas is the group's co-chairman.