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## New cities reignite debate over race

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BY [JOHNNY EDWARDS](#) AND [BILL TORPY](#) - THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Advocates urging the Legislature to allow new cities in DeKalb County point to the success of those recently created in bringing government closer to the people and lowering taxes.

But one impact of new cities in metro Atlanta has gone largely unspoken: all have led to elected governments that are almost entirely white in counties where whites are no longer a majority.

### NEW CITIES

The incorporation of Sandy Springs in North Fulton County as a municipality in 2005 unleashed a wave of votes, resulting in six additional cities. One impact of new cities in metro Atlanta has gone largely unspoken: all have led to elected governments that are almost entirely white in counties where whites are no longer a majority. Today, 44 of the 46 elected officials in those cities are white, the lone exception being Hispanic councilman Ivan Figueroa in Johns Creek who steps down next week. One seat in Johns Creek is vacant.

### SANDY SPRINGS, NORTH FULTON COUNTY, CREATED IN 2005



**Rudy Paul**  
Mayor



**John Paulson**  
District 1



**Ken Dishman**  
District 2



**Graham McDonald**  
District 3



**Gabriel Sterling**  
District 4



**Tiberio DeJulio**  
District 5



**Andy Bauman**  
District 6

### JOHNS CREEK, NORTH FULTON COUNTY, CREATED IN 2006



**Mike Bodker**  
Mayor



**Leonard Zaprowski**  
Post 1



**Brad Ruffensperger**  
Post 2



**Cori Davenport**  
Post 3



**Ivan Figueroa**  
Post 4



**Kelly Stewart**  
Post 5

Post 6  
is vacant

### MILTON, NORTH FULTON COUNTY, CREATED IN 2006



**Joe Lockwood**  
Mayor



**Karen Thurman**  
Dist. 1 Post 1



**Burt Hewitt**  
Dist. 1 Post 2



**William Lusk**  
Dist. 2 Post 1



**Matt Kuntz**  
Dist. 2 Post 2



**Joe Longoria**  
Dist. 3 Post 1



**Rick Mohrig**  
Dist. 3 Post 2

### CHATTAHOOCHEE HILLS SOUTH FULTON COUNTY CREATED IN 2007



**Tom Reed**



**John Taylor**



**Richard Schmidt**



**Claire Williams**



**Faye Godwin**



**Don Hayes**

Mayor	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	
<b>DUNWOODY, NORTH DEKALB COUNTY, CREATED IN 2008</b>						
						
Mike Davis Mayor	Denis Shortal District 1	Jim Ritcher District 2	Douglas R. Thompson District 3	Terry Hall District 1 At Large	Lynn Deutsch District 2 At Large	John Heneghan District 3 At Large
<b>PEACHTREE CORNERS, GWINNETT COUNTY, CREATED IN 2012</b>						
						
Mike Mason Mayor	Phil Sadd Post 1	James Lowe III Post 2	Alex Wright Post 3	Jeanne Aulbach Post 4	Lorri Christopher Post 5	Weare Grabrick Post 6
<b>BROOKHAVEN, NORTH-CENTRAL DEKALB COUNTY, CREATED IN 2012</b>						
						
Max Davis Mayor	Rebecca Chase Williams District 1	Jim Eyre District 2	Bates Mattison District 3	Joe Gebbia District 4		

SPEEDDRIVER06

The incorporation of new cities in metro Atlanta has had one impact that has gone largely unspoken: all have led to ... [Read More](#)

Almost a decade since Sandy Springs set the incorporation template, seven cities in Fulton, DeKalb and Gwinnett counties have been created. Today, 45 of the 46 elected officials in those cities are white, the lone exception being a Hispanic councilman in Johns Creek who steps down next week.

And in the history of those cities, of the 66 people elected since their inception, just one was black, a councilwoman, also in Johns Creek.

Almost no one involved with the incorporations would say race is a factor in the cities' creation. But the stark results give new ammunition to opponents' claims that the cities were a plan to erect new racial barriers and siphon revenue from areas that have a limited tax base for public services.

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- [Population shift could impact City Council election](#)
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Those left behind in unincorporated Fulton and DeKalb have seen taxes rise as county governments struggle to keep up services. And city governments lacking diversity have been accused of trampling minorities' rights in their quests to demolish apartments.

It's sparked costly litigation for Dunwoody, which faces a federal lawsuit alleging it violated the Fair Housing Act by trying to force more than 2,000 mostly-Hispanic residents out of two complexes so it can build a park.

Such entanglements might be avoided if city councils had members tuned in to minorities' needs, said Jerry Gonzalez, head of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials.

"Having communities isolated," Gonzalez said, "doesn't make sense in the country we're living in, and it doesn't make sense in the Georgia we're living in."

This year, residents in the proposed cities of Lakeside, Briarcliff and Tucker in north-central DeKalb are wrangling before the Legislature to set their boundaries. All would be largely white but with minority populations all in the 30-plus percent range.

Former state legislator Kevin Levitas, a leader in the Lakeside city effort, said the elective numbers in cities already created don't indicate anything other than "a reflection of the geography. Areas that are majority white, you have majority Caucasian representatives. Areas that are majority black have majority black representatives.

"When people classify this as some kind of re-segregation or racism, I find that offensive; that's an enormous leap in logic," he said.

He said Lakeside would have a similar makeup to Briarcliff and would help DeKalb by drawing more people and business into the city and, ultimately, the county.

"They're carving those cities out of black-controlled counties," countered state Sen. Emanuel Jones (D-Decatur), who during the 2012 debate about the creation of Brookhaven called that city a "racially

gerrymandered” entity.

“Is that a surprise to anybody?” he added. “Numbers don’t lie. Look at who has been elected. They’ve created white cities.”

Later in the interview, Jones softened – a bit – on the race angle. “It’s more than re-segregation. It has a little more class to it. They’re taking the *nice* communities and leaving the have-nots.”

It’s been decades since integration battles raged, but race still seeps into many facets of life. Interviews with officials and active citizens in the new and proposed cities bring forth a myriad of reasons why the numbers are what they are: Few willing minority candidates, limited numbers of registered minority voters, dispersed and transient minority populations.

But they are largely united in their insistence that racial motivations are not high in the minds of voters nor were they the reasons those cities were created.

“We’ve come to a time and place where I don’t think the people of Brookhaven think race is an important factor,” said Brookhaven Mayor Max Davis, who made his point referencing a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. “Engaging in race counting is focusing on the color of their skin, not on the content of their character. It’s old thinking. I’m the mayor of a new city.”

Michael Kang, an Emory University law professor who studies election law, said race is no longer a simple issue to calculate.

“Clearly, race is intertwined with politics,” he said. “Race, party and ideology all link up together here. It’s not surprising.”

## **Running and losing**

Rusty Paul, who is Sandy Springs’ second mayor and came to office this month, said the lack of minority success in elections in the new cities, particularly his, is not for a lack of trying. In Sandy Springs’s first election in 2005, Paul was campaign manager for Oz Hill, a retired Army officer who is black and came close to winning in a runoff.

“We’ve reached out to minority candidates but you can’t elect people who aren’t on the ballot,” said Paul, whose city’s population is about 20 percent black and roughly 40 percent minority. “In the last election, we ended up with seven white guys. That’s why it’s even more important we reflect the diversity of our city in our opportunities.”

Paul said he is seeking “racial and gender diversity” in the four city court judges who will be appointed and for local committees and boards. Getting more minorities involved, he said, ultimately brings more diverse candidates.

Hill said he did not notice a racial component in his campaign, saying he got 46 percent in the runoff and then served on the zoning board. “If you got in front of people and articulated your platform, then you have a shot,” Hill said.

Minority candidates have also run and lost races for seats in the new more rural cities at the south and north ends of Fulton, Chattahoochee Hills and Milton, respectively. Milton is about 9 percent black and three quarters white. Mayor Joe Lockwood said the statistics on the new cities’ councils were eye opening.

“The good news about that is, I’ve never thought about that,” Lockwood said. “I don’t think about black or white.”

Don Broussard, who is working to incorporate the city of Briarcliff, north of Decatur, was surprised at the totals. “Those numbers are pretty daunting,” he said. “I don’t want to say damning.”

He said Briarcliff would be one-third minority and there is an effort to carve out eight elective districts to create a majority minority district near Scottdale. He rejects the notion that race is a major factor in cityhood.

“Most whites moved to DeKalb County knowing it was a majority black county,” he said. But, he said, a factor fueling the cityhood movement is “many black officials have tilted toward (mainly serving) their communities.”

Also, corruption cases in DeKalb’s school and county leadership has fanned the incorporation flames. “Serial felony indictments is not a governing strategy,” he said.

Bob Lundsten, a Dunwoody resident and blogger who works for DeKalb County’s sole Republican commissioner, Elaine Boyer, chuckled when hearing the elective totals, saying “Forgive me if I don’t sound shocked.”

He said the Dunwoody Homeowners Association, a leader in the movement, is almost all white. “There’s an easy trap when creating a city (to say) ‘We want people to look like us,’ I honest to God don’t think it’s a conscious decision. The people who founded these cities are arrogant, rich white guys. That’s who they know.”

Dunwoody’s population is about a third minority, many who live in apartments. “Minorities historically aren’t voting in these cities,” Lundsten said. “The apartment folks don’t (care) about Dunwoody or whatever. They live near the interstate and are not politically active.”

### **Against the grain**

The only exceptions to the rule of these cities’ elections have been in Johns Creek, whose population is both upwardly mobile and 40 percent minority, with almost a quarter of the residents Asian. In 2006, in the city’s

first election, voters chose Karen Richardson, who is black, and Ivan Figueroa, who is of Puerto Rican descent.

Richardson lost her seat in a runoff last year, and Figueroa is stepping down later this month to move to St. Simons.

Figueroa is one of about eight Hispanic elected officials statewide. He's tried to recruit more minorities to run in Johns Creek, but said not everyone can muster what it takes to run a successful campaign, such as a political war chest and support of family and their employer. He said he never felt out of place about being a minority on the City Council, or in north Fulton in general. The cityhood movement wasn't racially motivated, he said, even if the makeup of the seven new cities' councils might seem that way.

"I understand the perspective," he said. "I don't know that I would necessarily agree with it."

Richardson disagrees. "I don't think race played a large part in my election (loss), but there were undertones," she said. "People like to vote for people who look like themselves."

She said her support of an investigation of Mayor Mike Bodker concerning conflict-of-interest allegations hurt her campaign. But she said a flier went out in the election calling her out as a Democrat (she said she has voted for all parties and has been a Libertarian) and then a telephone poll asking residents about her campaign questioned voters what race they were.

"That's racial politics at its worst," she said. "It plants a seed that there are differences in people that they weren't necessarily thinking about."

Richardson was an early supporter of Johns Creek incorporation but said the crowds coming to meetings have increasingly been more "visceral" and partisan, tying local government to national issues.

"I think it's disingenuous that people want to ignore the conversation around race and politics," she said. The incorporations were "not purely about taxes. There is racial politics. You can't get around that. I have to be honest."

An effort is brewing to form yet another city that would buck the trend, with a majority-black governing body. Unincorporated south Fulton County, which is about 80 percent black, overwhelmingly rejected cityhood in 2007 and has since missed out on millions of dollars in sales tax proceeds.

State Rep. Roger Bruce, D-Atlanta, who lives there, is pushing for another vote in May. If successful, the City of South Fulton would elect its leaders in November.

South Fulton County Commissioner Bill Edwards opposed cityhood in 2007, but said he isn't taking a position this time. One reason the last measure failed, he said, was that black voters aren't as eager to shed black leaders.

“If you want to get away from a majority-black government, you’ll cut your throat to do it,” Edwards said. “They didn’t have that problem down here. They thought the county was working well for them.”

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The incorporation of Sandy Springs in North Fulton County as a municipality in 2005 unleashed a wave of votes, resulting in the following cities.

Johns Creek, created in 2006, North Fulton County

Milton, created in 2006, North Fulton County

Chattahoochee Hills, created in 2007, South Fulton County

Dunwoody, created in 2008, North DeKalb County

Peachtree Corners, created in 2012, Gwinnett County

Brookhaven, created in 2012, North-Central DeKalb County

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