

# Say 'no' to LaVista Hills

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By Liane Levetan

Between now and the closing of polls Nov. 3, thousands of my neighbors and I will cast ballots to decide whether to organize ourselves into a new city of LaVista Hills. Like many of our neighbors, my husband Phil and I have lived in this wonderful community for decades. We raised our family and built our lives here. We also involved ourselves in the civic life of the area.

I have been privileged to serve the community in elective office, first as a district representative on the DeKalb County Commission, then as the county's second elected CEO, and finally as a member of the state Senate. While I have long been retired from elective politics, I still serve as a citizen representative on the Atlanta Regional Commission and closely follow local governmental affairs.

Like every one of my friends and neighbors, I am shocked and disgusted at what has become of our county government. What was once regarded as a model local government has deteriorated into a quagmire of political corruption, incompetence and rank cronyism. In the past year, we've seen one county commissioner plead guilty to stealing public funds and our county CEO convicted on corruption charges. There is almost certainly more to come.

For these reasons and more, it is easy to understand the desire to break away from county government and establish a municipality whose affairs – and spending – we believe we can influence. I share the despair and anger fueling the cityhood movement.

But after a great deal of soul searching, I have decided to cast my ballot against creating LaVista Hills. I hope the community as a whole will join me in rejecting this proposal. My reasons for taking this position are several:

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First, I am far from convinced a city of LaVista Hills can support itself, especially under the fiscal constraints imposed by the enabling legislation. I

have studied the Carl Vinson Institute report on the viability of LaVista Hills, and even the most optimistic reading of its analysis does not leave much room for error.

LaVista Hills advocates argue that rising property values will create even more of a cushion. As we all know from painful experience, property values don't always rise, and the next economic downturn would prove disastrous for a community that is overwhelmingly dependent on residential property taxes. If that happens, a city of LaVista Hills and its residents would have few good options and no way to undo the damage. Cross this bridge, and there's no going back.

Second, we are deluding ourselves if we think we can solve our problems by attempting to divorce ourselves from county government. By retreating into a new city, it's human nature to think we won't have to worry as much about the corruption and shenanigans in county government.

But even LaVista Hills advocates acknowledge the county would still be responsible for garbage collection, fire

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responsible for garbage collection, fire and emergency services, water and sewer services, public health, courts, the county jail and public library services. We would, of course, have to continue to fund those through county taxes. Create a new local government, and we'll have two groups of politicians to keep an eye on, and the temptation would be to take our eye off the county ball. That would be a mistake.

The good news in all this is that the cancer infecting our county government has been laid bare for all to see, and a citizenry that is both enraged and engaged is demanding solutions. Those solutions will be found not by retreating into artificial new communities that may not be able to sustain themselves. They will be found only by squarely facing the problems. That may be the harder course, but it is the better one.

*Liane Levetan is a former DeKalb County CEO.*