

My personal journey on the issue of Cityhood in DeKalb County  
By: Ron McCauley

It's come to my attention that my stance on Cityhood has become a topic of public discussion. Since that seems to have arisen as an active issue I've become motivated to write this bit of disclosure.

**The Experience in 2014:**

In the spring of 2014 I became aware of two cityhood initiatives in DeKalb County; Lakeside and Briarcliff. In service to my neighborhood, I decided to investigate what was happening. Immediately in my investigation I found the maps of both proposed cities. I found the Lakeside map to be confusing and troubling. Lakeside included some neighborhoods and excluded others. Lakeside seemed to be capturing commercial properties while not including the residents that supported the businesses within. Finally, the Lakeside map had an odd bulge outside the perimeter that included much of what people considered to be "Tucker." In contrast, the Briarcliff map didn't feature any of the "pick and choose" characteristics of the Lakeside map. Briarcliff borders simply encompassed all of unincorporated DeKalb County that was within the perimeter.

I contacted the leaders of both cityhood groups for further information. The answers from Briarcliff leadership made sense to me. The answers from Lakeside leadership didn't. In fairness, and in service to my neighborhood I decided to organize an information meeting for my neighbors. I invite leadership from both groups to come speak. The Briarcliff folks readily agreed. To my consternation, the Lakeside folks chose instead to attack my motives for organizing the meeting, attack the way I'd chosen to organize it, and attack the format of the flyer I had distributed announcing the meeting. This was my first indication of the difference in character of the leadership of Lakeside versus the leadership of Briarcliff.

In my attempt to be as fair to both sides as possible, I attempted to have a direct conversation with Lakeside leadership in order to present their side of the issues in their absence. I engaged in a string of emails with Lakeside co-chair Kevin Levitas and eventually was able to secure an appointment for a phone conversation with him. That I had to go to such significant effort to get that conversation was an item of great concern to me. When my conversation with Kevin produced answers that didn't satisfy my curiosity and seemed instead to lack sincerity and veracity I became concerned even further. Meanwhile, it came to my attention that Lakeside co-chair Mary Kay Woodworth had begun posting attack messages on discussion pages and social media about my meeting. It was at that point that I decided that the Lakeside people had earned my full opposition to what they wanted to achieve. In short, if a group that behaved as they did wanted something, then I couldn't stand idly and let it happen.

Briarcliff received the full force of my energy, money, and time. I genuinely believed that Briarcliff featured a plan that would be a positive influence in our community, take a selection of services away from a dysfunctional county government and provide "A better city for all." I'm proud to this day of the work I did on behalf of Briarcliff and would prefer that the proposal had been successful. Even though it didn't pass the legislature, I was very pleased that the Lakeside proposal didn't pass either.

It was unfortunate, but some dynamics on the Briarcliff board eventually became highly dysfunctional. I chose to disassociate from Briarcliff in the fall of 2014.

### **The range of issues in 2015:**

To borrow an apt phrase “we live in a different world than we did back then.”

I was disappointed to get the news that the Briarcliff and Lakeside efforts had merged. Considering the greatly different manner in which the two groups had operated in 2014, I didn’t imagine that such was possible.

I became alarmed when I saw that some haphazard annexation efforts by existing cities had arisen. Annexation efforts by Decatur and Avondale had been kicked off. The group “Together in Atlanta” (TIA) had gained traction to move Druid Hills and some surrounding neighborhoods into that city. I interpreted this all to be a mess that had been originated by the Lakeside/Lavista Hills effort. Further, I saw that the non-transparent, nasty behavior of the Lakeside group had continued in the new group eventually renamed “Lavista Hills Yes.” That nonsensical map that had been a feature of Lakeside had also been largely preserved in the Lavista Hills map.

There have been additional developments: Thanks to the hard work of the citizen committees “Blueprint DeKalb” and the DeKalb “Operations Task Force” some county reform bills had been drafted and proposed. They had the promise of eliminating much (if not most) of the dysfunction and corruption endemic to DeKalb County government. I was pleased to see that some wrong-doers such as Elaine Boyer were being brought to justice. I saw that further civic activism and energy was required to shepherd the reform bills through the legislature and that the mess of cityhood and annexation efforts needed to be halted.

I was fortunate to find some talented and dedicated civic activists who shared by concerns. We founded DeKalb Strong in January 2015 in order to advance the cause of halting the cityhood/annexation efforts and to contribute to the efforts at creating an effective county government.

I’m extremely proud of the progress of DeKalb Strong, the support and attention we’ve gained, and our contributions during the legislative session on issues such as passage of the DeKalb reform bills. DeKalb Strong members were a very persistent presence during the 2015 legislative session. We were a genuine pain to legislators attempting to advance annexation and cityhood bills. We ultimately weren’t successful in halting the cityhood bills, but the reform bills passed and the annexations didn’t. We went two for three in our legislative efforts – not a bad winning percentage at all. I’ll add that I was disappointed to observe that there was absolutely no engagement by the leadership of Lavista Hills to support the county reform bills. That absence would seem to be a contradiction to their stated goal of “good government.”

It would be my overwhelming preference that civic energy and attention be focused on improving county government. However, the focus of DeKalb Strong in the remainder of 2015 will be on defeating the non-productive and damaging cityhood referenda.

In the spirit of service to our larger community,

Ron McCauley