

South Fulton residents weigh annexation, incorporation

By [D.L. BENNETT](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 03/05/07

Nearly a year before Sandy Springs residents voted to incorporate, they knew where city lines would fall.

The same is true for Johns Creek and Milton.



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(ENLARGE)

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin pitches the Sandtown Community Organization on annexation with her city, citing improved services and a growing economic base. But planned legislation may undo any link-up. The city of Palmetto is also at the crossroads of a decision.

Supporters of the planned city of South Fulton wish they were so lucky.

Their vote to incorporate is set for June 19, but residents still don't know the city limits as developers, landowners and entire communities continue to try to annex into existing cities before the vote.

A shake-up last fall that saw some 13,000 acres move from unincorporated south Fulton to Palmetto, Union City, Fairburn and Atlanta continues even though lawmakers originally set an Oct. 30 deadline for all boundary changes.

Needless to say, it's been frustrating for cityhood supporters who must continue to advocate for a city, even while its size and makeup continue to shift.

"We knew a year ago what we thought the city was going to look like," said Mark James, an organizer of the proposed city. "Why has there not been the willingness to allow us to move forward under the same parameters [as north Fulton]? I am still as excited about the new city today as I was a year ago. What I'm not excited about is there has been a lot of municipal interruption. That has been the frustrating part."

And, that's just part of what's going on in a battle that has already divided residents and touched off a pitched legal fight. As the June 19 vote nears, the debate continues to intensify as residents push their friends and neighbors to choose between joining an existing city, remaining unincorporated or being part of the new city of South Fulton.

"You've got a couple of groups with interests they want to pursue, and there are quite a lot of folks out there who don't know a lot about the issue," said Harvey Davis, a resident of south Fulton's Sandtown area. "Its going to be difficult to predict what's going to happen."

The decision made June 19 will affect about 50,000 people and help decide what happens to roughly 100,000 acres between Palmetto and Atlanta. A second south

Fulton city, Chattahoochee Hill Country, is also on the June 19 ballot.

The group that once said it was just gathering information is now an advocacy group for the new city of South Fulton. They have a slogan, a logo and are making pitches for why the city needs to be created.

At the same time, other cities continue to annex property that would go into the new city. And Fulton County Commissioner Bill Edwards is working to torpedo any effort to form a new city or annex land into an existing one.

Last week, Mayor Shirley Franklin re-entered the debate with a sales pitch she made to Sandtown community residents about why they'd be better off in Atlanta than the new city.



Brant Sanderlin/Staff
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The Sandtown Community Association has been pushing that option to its members for months.

Franklin told about 100 Sandtown residents that Atlanta has much to offer, a growing economic base, improved services and a desire for greatness.

"I feel as if we've been neighbors for years," Franklin said during a two-hour meeting at Owl Rock United Methodist Church off Campbellton Road. "We are people who are determined to have a great city. We are determined to have the highest possible standards."

If Sandtown goes into Atlanta before June 19, that action could be overturned by the legislation sponsored by a group of Fulton lawmakers.

The bill would nullify any annexation after Oct. 30 last year.

Those lawmakers hope to uphold a deadline included in the original bill creating a potential city of South Fulton. The bill allowed annexation through Oct. 30.

Last year, the pro-city group sued to overturn the annexation that had already taken place. Instead, the judge's decision dropped the annexation deadline.

"The reality is the agreement between the cities and the Legislature was that everything would stop on the 30th," said Rep. Roger Bruce (D-Atlanta). "This was a compromise. This [legislation] should not be a surprise."

The battle going on across south Fulton first flared last fall in anticipation of that deadline.

It subsided through the Christmas holidays and has picked up as the vote nears.

The change sweeping across south Fulton has reshaped the area dramatically. The more than 13,000 acres that have been annexed — primarily by Palmetto, Union City and Fairburn — caused those three small cities to more than double in size.

And, while Atlanta, too, has gained ground by taking in subdivisions along its southern border, Sandtown's annexation could bring in several thousand new residents.

Donald Jeanne said he's been pleased so far with his subdivision's annexation by Atlanta.

"It was a decision that had to be made in a short time with imperfect information," Jeanne said. "Overall, I'm satisfied. I think everybody is."

<http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/cobb/stories/2007/03/04/0305annex.html>