

# Neighborhood News



NEWSLETTER OF THE LAVISTA PARK CIVIC ASSOCIATION  
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## Special Edition

### YOU NEED TO READ THIS NEWSLETTER

#### Friends, Neighbors, LVPCA Members and Residents of LaVista Park

The LaVista Park Civic Association Board has directed me to draft this special edition of our Neighborhood News. We have invested many hours and evenings evaluating cityhood and annexation issues for almost two years now. Currently, a sub-committee of the Georgia General Assembly's House Governmental Affairs Committee (GAF) is charged with finalizing the maps of proposed new cities and annexations in DeKalb County. They must complete their work by the end of the year so the full committee can take up the matter when the legislative session begins in mid-January. LaVista Park (LVP) is currently included in the map of the proposed new city of LaVista Hills. LVP is ALSO included in the map of an area designated for annexation into the City of Atlanta. Obviously we cannot end up in two maps. The committee will put us in one or the other. Whichever map we end up in, we will all get to vote on the issue sometime next year assuming the GAF sees fit to authorize a referendum.

To complicate matters, the City of Brookhaven has indicated they would be receptive should we want to do the legwork (obtain petition signatures of 60% of the homeowners in LVP) to be annexed. This, of course, assumes the successful annexation of Executive Park so that LVP would be contiguous to Brookhaven.

#### Recent Survey and a Second Survey

Two weeks ago we completed a survey. Thank you to those who participated. The survey was sent to more than 800 email addresses in our database and hand delivered to every home in LVP. We had approximately 209 electronic replies and 40 hard copy replies. The results of the survey can be viewed on the Leaf Talk page of our Website, [www.LaVistaPark.org](http://www.LaVistaPark.org). That survey indicated a preference for inclusion in LaVista Hills. In the narrative accompanying the survey we noted that the further development of two specific possibilities, Executive Park's annexation into Brookhaven and Druid Hills push for annexation to Atlanta,

could necessitate a second survey.

We now know that the Druid Hills Civic Association has approved a resolution calling for a referendum on annexation into Atlanta and that Brookhaven is very likely to approve Executive Park's annexation application. The first development could separate us from our schools and reassign LVP children to more distant and, some say, lesser quality schools. The second separates us and our influence from neighboring Executive Park. The LVPCA Board believes these developments change the landscape enough to ask for your participation in a second survey.

The second survey will be distributed via email. **We will hand deliver a hard copy to anyone who needs one. Please leave a message, with your name and address, at 404-633-3558 or send an email to [president@lavistapark.org](mailto:president@lavistapark.org) to request a hard copy of the survey.**

#### Next Steps

The remainder of this newsletter is designed to present a brief overview of our choices. Additionally, we have posted a considerable amount of information on the Leaf Talk section of the website. I encourage you to seek as much information in the media and online as you need to be comfortable with your choices on the second survey. Your LVPCA Board has done its best to follow these events and report back to you, but none of us are professional city managers or urban planners. We have regular jobs and limited hours. We are just volunteers interested in the best possible long term outcome for LaVista Park.

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## Annexation into Atlanta

Together in Atlanta is a group of Druid Hills residents that have spearheaded a movement for the Emory/Druid Hills area to become part of Atlanta. Their efforts were rewarded in late November when the Druid Hills Civic Association gave their approval for a referendum on annexation into Atlanta.

Technically, the area to be annexed is the attendance zones of Briar Vista and Fernbank Elementary Schools. That area includes Druid Hills High School and Emory University. LaVista Park is in this map by virtue of being in the attendance zone for Briar Vista.  
[www.facebook.com/TogetherInAtlanta](http://www.facebook.com/TogetherInAtlanta)

Why does Together in Atlanta want to bring the Emory/Druid Hills area into Atlanta? We don't know all the reasons, but a big reason is the defeat of the proposed Druid Hills Charter Cluster (DHCC) by the DeKalb School Board last year. Some supporters of the DHCC are very unhappy with that defeat and want to take their schools to another district (Atlanta) and try for a charter cluster there.

Another reason is likely Emory University's desire to be in Atlanta rather than a new DeKalb city or even to continue in unincorporated DeKalb. Emory has been publicly neutral on these developments other than stating it has no interest in being in LaVista Hills. But, an often repeated rumor is that Emory may be working behind the scenes to move their property into Atlanta.

The problem this situation presents for LaVista Park (LVP) is that our elementary school, Briar Vista and our high school, Druid Hills, will go into Atlanta with or without us. Even if we are able to pull ourselves out of the Atlanta annexation map and become part of LaVista Hills, those schools will go into Atlanta if the voters approve a referendum next year. Note that Woodland Hills has indicated a strong preference for Atlanta and is included only in that map. They are not in the LaVista Hills map.

If we lose our schools to Atlanta and stay in the DeKalb school district by virtue of joining LaVista Hills or Brookhaven, LVP children will be zoned to more distant and, what some see as, less desirable schools in DeKalb County. Most people, not all, believe good schools enhance property values. Most people, not all, believe poor schools detract from property values.

Atlanta is a medium size city anchoring a large metro area. Many LaVista Park homeowners chose to live in LaVista Park precisely because it was near Atlanta, but

not in Atlanta. And that logic is understandable given Atlanta's history and DeKalb County's history. In our first survey, Atlanta was polarizing; it was resident's first choice or their last, rarely a middle choice. In the comments section, we saw "anything but Atlanta" a number of times. We also saw "it has to be Atlanta," particularly from those concerned about the school situation described above.

It is our understanding that, under Atlanta Mayor Reed, the city has cut its budget while growing its reserves dramatically. They have put more police on the street. Crime has been reduced. Atlanta's school board and administration has turned over in the wake of the cheating scandal, and schools may be improving. It could be more expensive to live in Atlanta. The tax chart insert shows the projected property tax impact at various levels of assessed value. Note that assessments will always be done by DeKalb County officials. Note also that DeKalb County school taxes, the largest part of property taxes, are significantly reduced for some seniors, while Atlanta offers a lesser reduction. This difference could be impactful for seniors, particularly at lower income levels.

## LaVista Hills

LaVista Hills (LH), formerly known as Lakeside and/or Briarcliff, is the proposed new city for central DeKalb. LaVista Park (LVP) is currently included in the LH map. Their website is [www.lavistahills.nationbuilder.com](http://www.lavistahills.nationbuilder.com). LH would replace DeKalb County for police, parks, road maintenance, permitting and code enforcement, and planning and zoning services. DeKalb County would continue to provide all other services such as fire, water and sewer, trash pickup and schools.

LVP would form the western edge of LH which would stretch eastward and northeastward toward the Northlake Mall area and outside the Perimeter. Note that the area around Northlake Mall and all the territory outside the Perimeter are contested by the proposed City of Tucker. The Georgia legislature will be establishing the boundaries between Tucker and LH. It is reasonable to say that LH's financial strength will be impacted, positively or negatively, by the borders drawn by the State House subcommittee.

Other recently formed cities in Georgia have enjoyed successful tenures so far with many residents pleased with increased police presence and response times, ease of permitting, more control of zoning and improved park maintenance. There is every reason to expect that LH could achieve similar results. Property taxes for LVP resident would not change immediately with the formation

Comparison of Property Taxes between Unincorporated DeKalb and Atlanta in DeKalb									
The DeKalb County Tax Commissioner has reviewed this spreadsheet for accuracy.									
Fair Market	Unincorporated	DeKalb	Atlanta	Atlanta	DeKalb	Total	Atlanta	DeKalb	Prop Tax
Appraised Value	DeKalb	Schools	City	Schools	Base	Uninc DeKalb	City	Base	Differences
\$ 200,000	\$ 713	\$ 1,619	\$ 661	\$ 1,090	\$ 401	\$ 2,331	\$ 661	\$ 401	\$ (179)
\$ 300,000	\$ 1,110	\$ 2,578	\$ 1,161	\$ 1,960	\$ 620	\$ 3,688	\$ 1,161	\$ 620	\$ 53
\$ 400,000	\$ 1,508	\$ 3,537	\$ 1,662	\$ 2,829	\$ 840	\$ 5,045	\$ 1,662	\$ 840	\$ 286
\$ 500,000	\$ 1,906	\$ 4,496	\$ 2,162	\$ 3,699	\$ 1,059	\$ 6,402	\$ 2,162	\$ 1,059	\$ 518
\$ 600,000	\$ 2,303	\$ 5,455	\$ 2,662	\$ 4,568	\$ 1,278	\$ 7,759	\$ 2,662	\$ 1,278	\$ 750
\$ 800,000	\$ 3,099	\$ 7,374	\$ 3,662	\$ 6,308	\$ 1,717	\$ 10,472	\$ 3,662	\$ 1,717	\$ 1,215
\$ 1,000,000	\$ 3,894	\$ 9,292	\$ 4,663	\$ 8,047	\$ 2,156	\$ 13,186	\$ 4,663	\$ 2,156	\$ 1,680
<b>Assumptions and caveats:</b>									
2014 millage rates apply.									
Includes HOST Tax Credits. Basic Homestead Exemption Only (not valid for other exemptions or freezes).									
Assumes Atlanta Public Schools taxes will apply for annexed areas.									
Local government property tax comparison only.									
Water and Sewer fees are billed separately. City of Atl states that DeKalb rates will remain in effect for any annexed area.									
Sanitation Fees: \$265 Dek \$586 Atl are not included									
Atlanta does not have DeKalb's Fees for street lights(\$25), speed humps(\$25) and stormwater (\$48)									

of LH. Our taxes would be allocated between DeKalb County and LH based on the services provided. What happens with taxes in the future is anybody's guess. The LH organizers are genuinely interested in improving services, controlling costs and building a more responsive government for the specific services they propose to provide. The concern about LVP's inclusion in LH relates to what we lose around us. Brookhaven is likely to annex Executive Park. The Druid Hills annexation into Atlanta will take our schools into Atlanta. Under that likely scenario, not only would we lose the ability to influence the redevelopment of Executive Park, LVP children will be mapped to other, more distant and, some would contend, less desirable, DeKalb County schools. Most people believe that property values are influenced by the quality of area schools. By joining LaVista Hills, LVP will likely lose on two issues many residents consider important if not vital.

## Brookhaven

Brookhaven, should it complete its annexation of Executive Park, will be contiguous to LaVista Park (LVP). As such, LVP could be annexed into Brookhaven. We have met with Brookhaven's mayor and several council members. Their city planners have taken a hard look at LaVista Park and the tax revenue it produces. These officials have told us that LVP would be welcome in Brookhaven.

Brookhaven is a two-year old city in central DeKalb. [www.brookhavenga.gov](http://www.brookhavenga.gov). It has achieved some notoriety by pursuing an expensive lawsuit with a strip club, the Pink Pony and by fighting with its neighbor Chamblee over the Century Center office park. Both causes were expensive and were losers for the city.

Brookhaven city council members tell me they have had two millage rate cuts in the short life of the city while simultaneously building a reserve fund. I have personal friends that were opposed to Brookhaven when they voted. Two years later they are generally pleased with the new city. The mayor and councilpersons we met are enthusiastic about their city and their plans for improvements. Brookhaven has reduced police response times and improved their 911 service. They have improved the infrastructure and maintenance of their parks. Brookhaven's population is far smaller than the potential population of LaVista Hills, 12,000 vs. 72,000.

For LVP to join Brookhaven, annexation would have to be accomplished by signed petition of at least 60% of the homeowners. Those petitions would have to be gathered and submitted, according to Brookhaven officials, by early to mid-January. It is unclear who would champion the

Brookhaven cause over the next 30 days to gather 380 signatures during the holidays. The LVPCA board would not take on that task unless there was a significant preference for Brookhaven in the second survey.

By joining Brookhaven, LVP would be in the same jurisdiction as Executive Park and would, in theory, have influence as that commercial property is redeveloped. However, our school situation would be similar to that of LaVista Hills described above. With Briar Vista Elementary and Druid Hills High annexed into Atlanta and no longer available, LVP children would be reassigned to more distant and, what some consider to be, less desirable DeKalb County schools.

## What does the LVPCA Board Think?

The LVPCA Board has been reluctant to express an opinion. It has been our preference to follow the issues as closely as we can and disseminate as much information as we can. Candidly, the board has taken cityhood/annexation very seriously and has invested many hours of personal time in this process.

It is important to understand that these decisions are being thrust upon LaVista Park (LVP) by forces outside our neighborhood. We are caught geographically in the middle of LaVista Hills, Brookhaven and Druid Hills all with their own agendas. We didn't ask for these changes, but are forced to deal with them. Our municipal life is going to change and we can't stop it. It is truly a matter of choosing the least bad choice. Additionally, what looks good today, may not look so good tomorrow. We all have to go with what we know and make our best decision knowing that some assumptions may not materialize.

There are many issues involved: schools, property values, connectivity to commercial areas, police services and response times, taxes, taxes on seniors, zoning on all sides of LVP, connectivity to a community, governmental efficiency and effectiveness. Each board member, just like each LVP resident, assigns different amounts of importance to each of these issues.

Regardless of the outcome, the LVPCA will continue to exist and its board will continue its efforts to preserve the quality of life in LaVista Park.

All that said, the board voted to let its opinion be known. The LVPCA Board favors annexation into Atlanta by a vote of 8-1. The other vote was for Brookhaven. One member was not present.

## **My View** **by Steve Richards, president LVPCA**

I have lived in Metro Atlanta since 1986. About half of that time I have lived in unincorporated DeKalb County. For nine years, our home has been on Beech Haven Road in LaVista Park. At the time, Eddie and I bought here for many of the same reasons others have: good values for intown homes on big tree filled lots, practically in the City of Atlanta without being in the city limits, lower DeKalb County taxes and, more often than not, better services. Plus LVP is conveniently located to most of the city, and we had friends in the neighborhood.

I joined the LVPCA board six years ago and have served as VP3, treasurer (four years) and have just started my third – and final – year as president. When I became president a little over two years ago, the very first function I attended was at Oak Grove UMC where a group was hosting a “town hall” type meeting to talk about incorporation for a large chunk of central DeKalb south of I-85. That group turned out to be some of the original Lakeside organizers. I could tell they were serious from the start.

Since then I have been to many similar meetings, large and small, and have dedicated many of our association’s quarterly meetings to the topic of cityhood. I have discussed these issues with elected officials, school board members, mayors, city council members, and officers of other neighborhood associations. And I have talked to many friends, neighbors and LVP residents including former LVPCA officers and leaders. I have put a fair amount of time into this. Still, I only know a fraction of what I would like to know about all the variables and possibilities that will impact LVP.

In all the time I’ve been on the board, no one has ever come to us and said, “things are bad here, we need a new city.” Not once. Yet, we find ourselves having to make choices because of our neighbors’ dissatisfaction with their situations. I can’t change that. DeKalb County is changing and we have to deal with it. As we have heard all our lives, change is the one constant.

I favor annexation into Atlanta. My opinion is based largely on two likely outcomes: 1. the likelihood that Brookhaven will be successful in annexing Executive Park; and 2. the premise that the Druid Hills / Emory area will move into the City of Atlanta and take our elementary school, Briar Vista, and our high school, Druid Hills, along with them.

As much as anything else I favor Atlanta because of what

we don’t get from the other choices. I believe LaVista Hills will probably be successful with its new city. But if we are in LaVista Hills we will lose our schools to Atlanta and will be rezoned to more distant and, in the opinion of many, less desirable DeKalb County schools. Plus we lose our connection to Executive Park. We lose on both of those critical issues and will still have no influence on Cheshire Bridge and Lindbergh. If we go into the City of Brookhaven we keep our connection to Executive Park, but lose our schools in the same way as with LaVista Hills. Plus the logistics involved with Brookhaven annexation (petitions signed by 60% of the homeowners) are a tad daunting.

I am comfortable that Atlanta is an improving situation, and understand it has a long way to go. I believe the schools have bottomed out and have received the attention they need to recover. I see a lot of development in the city and sense some optimism there. No one likes higher taxes, but they are not as high as I originally thought. We have been told we’ll be able to stay on DeKalb County water and sewer. Atlanta has added to their police force, and I hope our near-Cheshire Bridge location means policemen will never be very far away. On the downside, I think our trash service will diminish in quantity and perhaps quality. I am not comfortable with the potential impact on senior’s property tax bills. Additionally we will not be in the same jurisdiction as Executive Park. So while that is a negative, we have redone our agreement with the developers and added that agreement to the conditions to the zoning of Executive Park as it moves into Brookhaven. While we may not be able to influence Executive Park, we will have a seat at the table for zoning issues on Cheshire Bridge and Lindbergh. Big projects are in the works for that area in the next few years.

One thing in which we all share a common interest is our property values. I believe that aligning ourselves with the Druid Hills/Emory area as well as our current schools as they move into Atlanta is the best way to preserve and improve our property values. While we certainly want to make independent and informed judgments, there are some bright folks over in Druid Hills and they don’t seem to be over fearful of life in the City of Atlanta.

One final thought on this. My opinion is just that – my opinion. It is partially based on assumptions and likelihoods only some of which will come to pass. It is also based on two years of involvement in the issue and talking with folks on every side of this debate. Choices are made based on your knowledge, assumptions and feelings.

For me, the choice is Atlanta.