

VISTA GROVE

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I'm on our nonprofit board for Vista Grove, it's called Vista Grove Initiative. We were formed about 3 years ago to look at all these options: remaining unincorporated, being annexed, forming our own city. Wanted to do that through a study and discussion. As a result of that study, our conclusion was that our area is very special, therefore we would form our own city.

So, let me try to quickly run through sort of why city of formation from our perspective, the how, and what does that look like for us. So, we get to why we form a city. In very specific areas, not all of them, but specific ones, having our own city gives us more voice in what projects have been permitted and how funds are spent in those areas, in dealing with challenges that we face. We are moving from a suburban to an urban area. We are experiencing really a skyrocket population increase. In 1960, we had about 256,000 people here, and you can look at that arc through 2018, we got more than 750,000 people here now. The Atlanta Regional Commission looking to where we are going to be in 2040, it sees that number going up. So from 2015 to 2040 a twenty-one percent increase, so up to about 850,000. The AJC ran an article that said by 2050 we could be up to a million. That's a lot of people, a lot of new residents who want an attractive area. With that, that comes a lot of impact. And it's an ongoing issue. Our roads wear out. We need better sidewalks. With more families and residents, we need more accessibility—a lot less driving and we want to be able to bike and walk to attractive public spaces.

So, city enterprise is not really short term, it's long term. It's asking the question if we make these changes, what do we do know to prepare for future growth. And with those changes in mind, Vista Grove focused only on two specific areas, really three service areas. Parks and recreation is one of them. Roads and sidewalks and then planning and zoning. You can think of that as the three Ps: parks, paving, and planning. And those three Ps share the characteristics of really benefitting from local input and planning.

So, if you think about parks and green space. Terrific news from Commission Rader, who's really been an advocate and ally in fighting for parks. The reality is we are under-parked area--about 12 parks in the Vista Grove blueprint. We ought to be able to walk 5, 10 minutes to green space for a park. We ought to have more parks. And if you walk in other cities in the metro areas, we are under-parked. So, by handling parks ourselves, we will be able to focus on acquiring parks and green space, comprehensive planning connects us. And I think excitingly particular projects. And one of them that has the most potential I think is a connected multi-use trail. Vista Grove connector from the north fork to the south fork of the Peachtree River. Peachtree Creek system, you can imagine, spurs going off a trail like that, biking, walking to schools, retail areas, and to other parks. And that's the kind of project neighboring cities have shown is very effective going forward.

Roads and sidewalks are more mundane in some respects, but really important. And there you have—you see this in Tucker and Brookhaven—regular programs of streetscape

maintenance and paving, streetscape enhancement. So it's great thinking about smart streets and how that creates more beautiful walkable spaces and revive walkability. Also help economic development. And sidewalk expansion, especially in critical areas near schools.

Planning and zoning, very focused on comprehensive plans. The cities maintain future improvements in the area, consistent code enforcement, and adaptability and quick response to the kind of issues that come up. You can think about a local nightclub issue is the sort of thing where you want rapid response and voice.

Two other areas I'll mention quickly. They're not service areas, but cities have shown themselves very effective in these areas One is community spirit. Building and developing a sense of community. That's done through festivals. That's done through beautifying public spaces—creating those destinations where people get out and walk. The other is economic development, and that means—we're not Brookhaven. We have our own character. That means in the right areas. You can think about Briarcliff and Clairmont where you have some cracked asphalt on the side and Presidential Drive area. Or areas that are already vital that you want to continue to develop like Lavista and Oak Grove. So, the kinds of retail commercial we like to see enhancing economic development and walkability to those places which is also an economic development factor. So, in all those areas being your own city gives us more voice and more directability to shape that.

So, how do cities, how do they operate to accomplish that? One thing that's important is that they're not one size fits all. Tucker is not Dunwoody is not Brookhaven or Chamblee. Cities adapt to the priorities and the needs of the communities that they serve. Recent experience has shown that that service literally is an issue. We respectfully disagree that there is an extra layer. There is not Those service areas focus on bringing those specific services closer to the people they serve. In fact, under state law, cities and counties are required to work together to ensure efficient service delivery. It's called a service delivery strategy. The Department of Community Affairs oversees it. Counties and cities are required to have it in writing how they make sure that there is no overlap or duplicative services. And that partnership between counties and cities has been very, very effective. In fact, there's a 2-year start-up process for cities that involves very close negotiation and work with the county. We've given a lot of thought to how cities can partner with and strengthen the county, and think that particularly when compared with alternatives like annexation into a Chamblee or Brookhaven—that our own city gives us the best chance to do that.

Word about the form of government. The city manager/council structure. Where you have a professional city manager, six council representatives, and a mayor. That gives you really an optimal ratio about 1 to 10,000—one representative to 10,000 people. You can look at our chart on our web site, which is vistagrove.org, which spells this out. Really the best possible accountability and transparency for regular budgeting and detailed financial reporting to an internal auditor to an external ethics officer. So, those issues are very, very important.

Word about finances and funding. There's a detailed study on the web site, but we have a very strong tax base, plenty of revenue sources, not just residential property taxes. The funding

for a city, which is about \$25 million, is a really small percentage from the overall county budget, which is about \$1.3 billion. So, you're talking about 1 or 2 percent there. And as importantly, new cities in DeKalb—Tucker, Brookhaven, have not raised the millage rate that they have control over on their tax bill. They've kept them steady or even lowered them. And the Tax Commissioner publishes a sheet—I'll give James a copy, and he can distribute it, and you can look and see that in fact, if you're in Tucker now, you're going to pay a little less for the same property value that you would in unincorporated DeKalb. And that's the reality, the data is really important, that's the reality of what is going on in new cities.

And because of police, we do think that incorporating a city would be more supportive of county finances in that respect. If we're annexed into Chamblee or Brookhaven, those areas that are annexed draw off that police revenues. So, that's one factor, but not the only factor in how a City of Vista Grove could not only help us but make the county stronger. The transfer of revenue to a city, and I was alluding to earlier is about \$5.5 million—this recent analysis of net impact.

That doesn't mean for the rest of the county taxes go up or services are cut. To the contrary, it didn't happen with Brookhaven. It didn't happen with Tucker. What it means is an increase in efficiency. The counties continue to thrive. In fact, it's expanded services like sanitation, offering it to new cities. Just one program about contract compliance that the county put into place last year. There was an article in the AJC about this recently, saved \$4.5 million. Just looking at big contract procurement more carefully. So, that would almost entirely offset that entire issue or would offset that impact.

So, city/county partnership has been really, really effective, and we think that we can do great things for this area and for the county as a whole. What would that require of us, which is the last piece? You can have the best structural protections in the world. We think the charter, I talked about the ethics protections, are very strong and robust. But we have to be willing to take that challenge because any government requires great citizen participation to make that effective. So, that means we have to commit to showing up to meetings, being on committees, staying informed and staying engaged. And that's really the key to success. This is an incredibly engaged area. So if you think that those kind of long-term goals are worthwhile, and you think we are up to that challenge--we think that we are--then incorporating into a city offers a very good option for the area. Our website is vistagrove.org if you want more information.