

A loud 'no' to South Fulton city

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Fulton County voters overwhelmingly rejected the proposed city of South Fulton on Tuesday, preventing the county from becoming the first in Georgia with every property inside a city.

The decision means Fulton County commissioners will continue to decide local issues such as planning, parks, public works and public safety for an island of unincorporated land that sprawls over 62,000 acres and sweeps in about 45,000 people south of Atlanta all the way to Palmetto.

The new city would have handed those decisions to a City Council. Currently, the seven-member County Commission has one member who lives in the huge area.

"We are all in a state of shock," said Benny Crane, an insurance agent who helped organize the pro-city efforts. "The voters of south Fulton spoke today. They made it clear they want to have a city controlled by six commissioners who don't live in south Fulton County."

Tuesday's rejection of incorporation marked a dramatic turn in county politics. With 97 percent of the votes counted, about 85 percent of voters rejected incorporation of the new city. Voters in north and south Fulton had approved four other new cities by similarly large margins over the past two years.

County Commissioner Bill Edwards, who represents south Fulton, started advocating for a new city more than a year ago. He later switched and waged a fierce campaign for the County Commission to maintain control.

He was stunned by Tuesday's results. "I never thought it would have been like that," Edwards said. "I really thought it was going to be closer. That sends a hell of a message."

The vote saves Fulton County's unincorporated services. Fulton once spent more than \$100 million and had more than 1,000 employees providing services to unincorporated communities. But the 2005 vote to incorporate Sandy Springs started a parade of new cities — Johns Creek, Milton and Chattahoochee Hill Country.

The 2007 budget for south Fulton comes to \$48.9 million.

In Clayton County, meanwhile, Linda Lord must wait another four weeks for a chance to complete the term of her deceased husband, Wes, on the Forest Park City Council. She and Avery Wilson will compete in an Oct. 16 runoff for the vacant council seat. Roy Lunsford finished third.

Forest Park voters also decided Tuesday to give communities the power to tax themselves to raise money for various projects. City leaders wanted the ability to create tax allocation districts. The city is in the early stages of a plan to redevelop the soon-to-be-closed Fort Gillem U.S. Army base. The referendum passed by close to a 3-1 margin.

In neighboring Riverdale, voters agreed to allow tax allocation districts by more than a 2-1 margin. City officials are working on a plan to develop the downtown, which they say will add about \$400 million to the city's tax base.

Staff writer Eric Stirgus contributed to this article.

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