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NEWS ARTICLE: Gainesville Times on February 19, 2012

Oakwood growth options still on the horizon

City's failed annexation attempt won't deter its plans

Oakwood's failed attempt last month to gain access to Lake Lanier by way of some key roadways hasn't discouraged future growth plans.

"We haven't changed. We would still be very open to serving areas that want to be part of the community," City Manager Stan Brown said in a recent interview.

The city sees the Ga. 53/Winder Highway corridor as one potential area where the city could eventually stretch its boundaries.

Teaming up with Braselton, the South Hall city has a vast sewer expansion project in the works in that area, along with a smaller one at Winder and Atlanta highways.

Some growth already has taken place in that part of town, which is straddled by the four-lane Winder Highway. A shopping center, child care center and pharmacy are a few businesses that have developed there over the past few years.

"We think, with that infrastructure in place, over time there will be properties out there that will have a desire to come into the city," Brown said.

Also, "if you look at the (city) map, there's a lot of (annexation) opportunities that we're certainly open to, but just like it was with the lake, we're not trying to force anything."

In January, the Hall County Board of Commissioners rejected the city's request to annex Flat Creek and Mountain View roads between McEver Road and the lake.

A stream of area residents vehemently protested the move, even though the city said it would be bound by a county-approved

resolution stating the city wouldn't annex in such a way as to create unincorporated islands.

Their concerns ranged from uncertainty over potential development to satisfaction with Hall County providing sheriff's patrols along the roads.

The city's annexation request also covered roads around the city that run in and out of the city, from smaller stretches, such as Candlestick Lane, to more heavily traveled roads, such as the four-lane Thurmon Tanner Parkway between Mundy Mill Road and Ga. 13/Atlanta Highway.

That part of the proposal was never specifically addressed by residents or commissioners.

Brown said after the meeting that the city is "committed to still connecting our community to the lake."

"We think we have a lot of good services to offer," Brown said, speaking on the subject since that vote. "We would be interested in talking with anyone who would like to know more about Oakwood."

Brown suggested to Oakwood City Council last week that city officials meet lake homeowners about a future land-use plan for the area, regardless of annexation matters.

He said he believes residents in the area "are more at risk at being in the county as they stand right now than they would be if we at least had some sort of an overlay district that we could work with those landowners to create."

That way, "if they ever did want to come into the city, we would have some design standards that would provide some level of protection," Brown added.

Verra L. Coppedge, president of Hidden Harbor Homeowners Association, said she believes residents would be open to talking to Oakwood about a land-use plan for the area, but they want to see what the city's vision is for the area "before we ever commit to that."

She said that if the city were interested in a quality residential area with access to Lake Lanier, "we would be more than willing to talk to them."

Residents are leery, however, of public recreational uses in the area that might draw large crowds and noise.

Generally speaking, Coppedge said she believes that the city needs to worry first about property that's in the city limits already, "then (consider) the outlying areas."

The city hasn't been shy about broaching the touchy topic of annexation.

Several years ago, it sent letters to county residents living just outside the city and asked them if they would consider becoming part of the city.

"We basically looked at the map and saw some of the (unincorporated) holes in our area," Brown said. "We sent information out inviting people to town hall meetings, kind of like what we did with the lake."

The city held a couple of public meetings in November about the city's vision of some day reaching Lanier.

In the previous venture, "we processed all (the annexation requests) into one package," Brown said.

At the time, the city was working on a tax allocation district - an area targeted for redevelopment with a property tax increment helping to pay for certain public-use projects - and a long-range plan for the downtown area.

"If you looked at the areas that we focused on, they were areas that were part of that planning effort," Brown said.

About 70 properties ended up joining the city as part of that effort.

Generally speaking, "anything that's in our sewer district, we would be open to serving," Brown said.

Hall County and the cities have a map showing which government will serve designated areas throughout the county.

That document "is what I consider the areas we would potentially grow into," Flowery Branch City Manager Bill Andrew said. "Wherever our sewer goes is where we would go. We offer water in some areas, but sewer is our main enticement to bring people into the city."

Flowery Branch operates its own water and sewer system. Oakwood, on the other hand, has agreements with other governments to provide those services.

Changes are being made to the sewer district map, with that work likely to wrap up possibly by late spring or early summer, said Ken Rearden, Hall's director of public works and utilities.

Braselton, with a current sewer district comprising the southernmost tip of Hall County, is among the fastest-growing municipalities in the region but only annexes when property owners have requested it, Town Manager Jennifer Dees said.

"We've never actively approached anyone about annexation, but the (Town) Council over the years has identified directions in which they wanted the town to grow and have planned infrastructure there to encourage development," she said.

The town "doesn't annex everyone who asks," Deaton added. "If the council doesn't feel the proposed land use is a good fit, they vote to deny."