

Segregation by Secession: Buckhead and Municipal Incorporation in Metropolitan Atlanta

By Henley Adams

On May 31, 2020, President Donald J. Trump took to X, then known as Twitter, to deliver a familiar rallying cry: “LAW & ORDER!” The phrase resurrected a political language familiar in the racialized “law and order” rhetoric of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.¹ Trump’s revival of the slogan was not an innovation but an inheritance, borrowing a script that for decades portrayed American cities as symbols of moral decay rather than as communities struggling due to inequality. Through this rhetoric, “crime” became a proxy for race, and “order” became a euphemism for control. President Trump continued this rhetoric into 2025, tweeting, “we must also bring back LAW and ORDER to our cities and towns,” a message that emphasized his recurring reliance on fear and nostalgia as political appeals.

The same rhetoric has found a municipal echo in Atlanta, Georgia, where the politics of “law and order” have been reconfigured into the language of local control. Over the past two decades, metropolitan Atlanta has witnessed a wave of cityhood movements, from Sandy Springs to Buckhead, that display a new form of suburban secessionism. In affluent neighborhoods like Buckhead, residents have framed withdrawal from the city as a necessary process to restore safety, autonomy, and accountability. These cityhood campaigns reflect the same politics of fear and control that have long underpinned conservative “law and order” rhetoric; words revived most visibly by Trump but rooted in decades of racialized political discussions. Buckhead, a predominantly white and upper-class enclave, presents itself as prosperous and orderly in opposition to an Atlanta deemed unsafe and misgoverned, revealing the racial and class tensions underlying the city’s politics. Beneath these arguments lies a persistent pattern of racial exclusion that has long structured Atlanta’s urban geography. Georgia’s cityhood laws, grounded in *Hunter v. City of Pittsburg*, allow wealthy suburbs to formalize this exclusion through new municipal boundaries.² The result is a system of structural segregation sustained through legal processes rather than overt racial policy. By merging racialized “law and order” rhetoric with

¹ Michelle Alexander, “BOOK DISCUSSION KIT: The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” n.d., <https://louisville.edu/braden/files/new-jim-crow-book-discussion-kit>, 16.

² *Hunter v. City of Pittsburgh* (United States Supreme Court November 18, 1907).

state sanctioned incorporation laws, Georgia’s cityhood movements transform political grievance into geographic segregation, revealing how structural racism adapts to the language of governance.

The legal foundation for municipal incorporation in Georgia consists of both the state supremacy principle expressed by the Supreme Court in *Hunter v. City of Pittsburgh* and the statutory processes through which the state legislature authorizes city formation.³ In that case, the Court declared that municipalities “are political subdivisions of the State” and “at all times wholly under its legislative control.”⁴ The Court further affirmed that a state “may expand or contract the territorial area, unite the whole or part of it with another municipality” or even “repeal the charter and destroy the corporation.”⁵ This ruling solidified a doctrine of absolute legislative dominance over municipalities; a principle that continues to influence the balance of power between cities and states across the nation. In Georgia, however, its consequences have been especially notable.

The Georgia Constitution codifies this legal hierarchy by granting the General Assembly direct authority over creating, eliminating, and altering municipal corporations. *Article IX, Section II, Paragraph II* states that “the General Assembly may provide by law for the self-government of municipalities,” indicating that local autonomy exists only through legislative delegation.⁶ *Paragraph I(c)* reinforces that authority by permitting the General Assembly to preempt “any local action” by general law, again underscoring the state’s dominance in municipal affairs.⁷ Ultimately, these provisions leave very limited room for independent local governance.

Since Georgia bestows the power of municipal creation on the General Assembly and places few restrictions on the process, incorporation can easily function as an instrument of Exclusion. The process of city incorporation is as follows: after the basic demographic requirements are met, a state legislator introduces a local bill to establish the proposed city charter.⁸ If the bill passes, only residents within the proposed city boundaries may vote in a local

³ Ibid, 161.

⁴ Ibid, 161.

⁵ Ibid, 178-179.

⁶ Ibid., Par. II.

⁷ Ibid., Par. I.

⁸ Georgia Constitution, *Article IX, Section II, Paragraph I*, in *Constitution of the State of Georgia* (Atlanta: Georgia Secretary of State, revised

referendum to approve incorporation.⁹ Neighboring communities, often poorer and more racially diverse, are excluded from the vote and therefore are excluded from the cityhood process altogether. This exclusion extends beyond geography: when wealthy, predominantly white areas secede, they withdraw not only their voters but also their tax base from more diverse cities, diminishing those cities' political influence and fiscal capacities. As a result, minority voters are restricted to smaller, under-resourced jurisdictions, while the political power of suburban areas expands. With no legal requirement for racial or regional impact studies, Georgia's legal doctrine permits privileged communities to withdraw from shared governance under the rhetoric of local control, expanding inequality through both spatial and legal means.

The Buckhead cityhood movement stands as the latest expression of Georgia's suburban secessionism and illustrates how municipal incorporation laws intersect with race, class, and political identity. Emerging in 2021, the movement was initially sparked by public safety concerns amid high-profile local and national crime, which raised doubts about the effectiveness of the Atlanta Police Department.¹⁰ Organized under the name "Buckhead City Committee," residents argued that Atlanta's government had continuously failed to provide sufficient policing, fiscal transparency, and neighborhood control.¹¹ Their rhetoric mirrored the "law and order" politics re-popularized by President Trump, presenting Atlanta as unsafe and misgoverned while portraying Buckhead as a well-behaved but neglected contributor to the city's tax base.

Buckhead generates approximately "40% percent of the assessed value of the city of Atlanta's property," prompting residents to question the value they receive for their taxes paid.¹² Residents cited issues such as "neglected infrastructure" and "undermaintained parks" as evidence of government failures.¹³ These concerns, although framed in neutral terms of accountability, reflect a longer history of racial and economic separation in Atlanta. Efforts to create "Buckhead City" develop from prior movements in Georgia's suburbs that used local governance to protect property values and shape community demographics along racial and

March 2019), 61–62.

⁹ Georgia Constitution, 61–62.

¹⁰ Athan Clark, "4 Issues Facing the Buckhead Community in Atlanta," *Georgia Public Policy Foundation*, November 9 2023, <https://www.georgiapolicy.org/news/georgia-public-policy-foundation-releases-a-report-assessing-key-issues-on-buckhead-cityhood-debate/>.

¹¹ Clark, "4 Issues Facing the Buckhead Community."

¹² J. D. Capelouto and Jennifer Peebles, "What would 'Buckhead City' look like? We crunched the numbers," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 25, 2021.

¹³ Clark, "4 Issues Facing the Buckhead Community."

socioeconomic lines. Buckhead's failed cityhood campaign fits within a broader context of suburban incorporation in metropolitan Atlanta. Since 2005, Georgia has seen the addition of eleven new cities.¹⁴ Notably, Sandy Springs in 2005, followed by Milton in 2006, Dunwoody in 2008, and Brookhaven in 2012.¹⁵ The majority of these municipal incorporations occurred in wealthy white neighborhoods within counties that have seen substantial demographic transformations since the 1960s.¹⁶ This trend coincided with a rising percentage of Black residents in suburban Atlanta across Fulton, DeKalb, and Cobb Counties.¹⁷

Incorporations significantly reshape the area's economic and political landscape by defining who belongs within Atlanta's economic and political community through exclusion. These incorporations significantly reshaped the area's economic and political landscape. In 2012, officials in Fulton County estimated that the incorporation of Sandy Springs cost the county approximately \$38 million annually.¹⁸

These cityhood movements are framed in neutral terms; however, they rely on covert racism and racialized assumptions to conceal their exclusionary aims. By framing incorporation as a matter of safety, or restoring "law and order," advocates conceal the way these narratives reproduce longstanding fears about crime, disorder, and resource redistribution: the fears historically placed onto Black communities to justify separation. According to the Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, proponents for Georgia's cityhood movements avoid mentioning racial issues when campaigning, but they often advocate for more control "over zoning and tax hoarding, which are tools that are often used to maintain residential segregation."¹⁹ Regardless of the genuine motivations of these movements, their consequences are the same: new cities, typically majority white, remove resources from unincorporated areas and hurt the economic development of the communities of color left behind.²⁰ In Brookhaven, for example, the median sale price for property value was around \$500,000 compared to

¹⁴ Luisa Godinez-Puig and Sharon Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation in Metro Atlanta," *Housing Perspectives (blog)*, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, May 8 2023, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/incorporation-new-cities-has-increased-racial-segregation-metro-atlanta>.

¹⁵ Godinez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

¹⁶ Godinez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

¹⁷ Godinez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

¹⁸ Alana Semuels, "Atlanta's Controversial Cityhood Movement," *The Atlantic*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/the-border-battles-of-atlanta/523884/>.

¹⁹ Godinez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

²⁰ Godinez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

\$280,000 in Dekalb County overall.²¹ Additionally, communities left outside these new city boundaries often lack the political power and economic base to launch their own incorporation efforts, further deepening inequality.²²

Buckhead's cityhood proposal followed the same pattern observed in Georgia since 2005. Proponents argued that incorporation would bring better policing, efficient financial expenditures, and increased local autonomy, while critics of Buckhead incorporation in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution warned that secession would eliminate nearly forty percent of Atlanta's revenue and deepen existing racial and socioeconomic divides. Although the Georgia Senate rejected Buckhead's cityhood bill in 2023, the effort exemplifies how municipal incorporation continues to serve as a mechanism through which affluent communities consolidate resources and influence within a system that prioritizes local control over regional equity.

The wave of municipal incorporation efforts across metropolitan Atlanta has deepened both racial segregation and fiscal inequality, creating significant disparities in tax revenue and infrastructure quality between newly formed cities and the communities left behind.²³ While the motivations behind these cityhood efforts remain debated, their outcomes are nevertheless the same: greater concentration of wealth and resources in predominately white areas while their counterparts are left disadvantaged. Nevertheless, state legislators have a plethora of resources to mitigate these inequities.²⁴ They could expand participation in municipal incorporation referenda to include all county residents, ensuring that all communities have a voice in the process.²⁵ State legislators could also require in-depth economic impact assessments that analyze how incorporation affects adjacent communities. Lastly, redistributive tax policies could be implemented to ensure that communities with lower property values still have access to high-quality infrastructure, services, and schools.²⁶

Communities excluded by incorporation typically lack the political and financial

²¹ Godínez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

²² Carl Vinson Institute of Government, *Financial Impact of Further Incorporation in DeKalb County* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2019), 28.

²³ Godínez-Puig and Cornelissen, "The Incorporation of New Cities Has Increased Racial Segregation."

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

resources necessary to launch their own cityhood initiatives.²⁷ In cases where incorporation is plausible, it can become an assertion of independence and self-determination. The establishment of predominately Black cities, such as South Fulton and Stonecrest, illustrates how incorporation may counteract inequalities constructed by earlier, predominately white cityhood movements.²⁸ Black leaders often frame these efforts as tools to secure greater local control over resources and representation.²⁹ However, research also indicates that incorporation of predominately Black communities does not necessarily reverse the broader structural advantages that white communities continue to possess.³⁰ Wealthier white areas remain the primary recipients of high-quality schools, maintained infrastructure, and reliable public transit.³¹ In this sense, Black cityhood movements may alleviate the symptoms of inequality, but the underlying structures that produce it viciously persist.

Reforming Georgia's incorporation laws is crucial to building a more equitable structure of local governance. Such reforms must begin with acknowledgement that local control, while framed as a neutral administrative process, is rooted in racial and economic exclusion. Expanding participation in municipal incorporation referenda, requiring economic impact assessments, and enacting redistributive tax policies would help ensure that the legal framework for incorporation is less likely to reinforce systemic disparities. Until these changes occur, cityhood movements will continue to replicate segregation and economic inequalities under the facade of administrative efficiency and local autonomy.

From the national stage to the local ballot, the rhetoric of "law and order" operates much closer to home than it may appear. In Georgia, this language has shaped a legal doctrine that permits affluent communities to secede under the claim of efficiency and accountability. The Buckhead cityhood movement, though unsuccessful, exemplifies how racial and economic hierarchies persist through legal structures rather than overt discrimination. Georgia's municipal incorporation laws must be reformed to confront the racial biases embedded within them. Only then can local governance promote collective equity rather than selective autonomy.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.