

Trans activist runs for Pine Lake City Council

Gender identity not an issue in town already home to state's first openly gay mayor

by JENNIFER J. SMITH

PINE LAKE, Ga. — The tiny town of Pine Lake, a former resort community located just outside I-285 near Stone Mountain, will soon learn whether it will be home to another political first for Georgia and possibly the U.S. on Nov. 6.

Transgender activist Dallas Denny, campaigning for the open Pine Lake City Council Post 1, would become Georgia's first transgender elected official if successful in her bid against former City Council member Charlotte Neil.

Pine Lake already boasts Georgia's first known openly gay mayor, Al Fowler, elected in November 1999.

While the milestone may be important to gay and transgendered activists and political observers, Denny herself is unmoved.

"My focus is open communication between the city and its population. I actually considered not running because I am transgendered. I have always treated my own transgender status as irrelevant," she said.

Most Pine Lake residents and officials

JOAN SHERWOOD



Dallas Denny will become the first transgendered elected official in Georgia, and possibly the country, if successful in her bid for Pine Lake City Council.

seem unconcerned about the subject.

"No, her transgender status doesn't matter to me at all," said lesbian resident Sheryl Feenan. "Sexuality isn't an issue in Pine Lake, nor are most other personal issues. I'm looking for a strong voice and someone who can represent us, that's it."

Heterosexual resident Mike Tarnower agreed. "Even if a man was incredibly flaming, or a woman incredibly butch, it wouldn't matter to me," he said. "Sexual orientation and other issues just don't matter a bit here."

Mayor Al Fowler said Pine Lake residents are simply "looking for the most qualified candidate."

"I urge everyone to talk to the candidates and vote for the most qualified, regardless of who that is," he said.

Officials with the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund in Washington, D.C., a national group that endorses viable gay candidates, said they are unaware of any openly transgendered elected officials currently in office in the country.

The Victory Fund does not monitor every race involving a gay candidate, and the group was not aware of Denny's campaign.

While Denny did not receive endorsement from the Victory Fund or any other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered groups like Georgia Equality or Georgia Stonewall Democrats, she also did not seek them.

"I'm just running a quiet little campaign here," she said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't even spent my first dollar. Pine Lake is the kind of city where people can get elected without spending money, that's one of the things I love about it."

Denny is the founder and a board member of the national transgender organization Gender Education & Advocacy, which focuses primarily on education rather than politics, and she founded its precursor organization, AEGIS. Her Pine Lake home keeps her grounded in the midst of her activism, she said.

"As is the case with most full-time activists,

I wasn't really looking out for myself — I was burning the candle at both ends," Denny said.

"Buying a house was a really good thing for me. It gave me a safe refuge. It gave me a big renovation project, since it was built in 1936, and it gave me a sense of community."

Denny has worked as a behavior specialist for the DeKalb Community Service

Board since 1989.

"If I win I'll work really hard, but if I don't, I have a lot of other things in my life that I'm working on," said Denny.

While Denny would take Pine Lake's diversity another step, the city already has a long history of gay and lesbian representation. The seat Denny and Neil are running for was vacated by lesbian Lisa Hudson, but it is the Post 5 seat that normally garners the most attention.

The last five City Council members who held Post 5 were gay, including current member Martha Renfro-Garner, who is running for re-election unopposed.

Although home to just under 650 residents, Pine Lake has fast become known as one of the state's most tolerant and diverse municipalities. Pine Lake also surfaced in the 2000 U.S. Census, where same-sex "unmarried partners" actually outnumbered unmarried opposite-sex couples in the town.

