



## SHOULD MILTON COUNTY BE REVIVED?

**BURNING QUESTION**

Breaking up is hard to do—just ask Fulton County.

By Chandra R. Thomas

THE PAINT ON THE WELCOME signs is barely dry in some of metro Atlanta's newest incorporated towns, but the next secession debate is already under way. Sandy Springs, Johns Creek, and Milton were recently born out of long-fought battles for independence from Fulton County, which residents and leaders argued wasn't adequately serving their tax dollars. Now, proposed legislation calls for a state constitutional amendment that would split Fulton County, leaving the southern portion intact and folding most of the northern section into a newly resurrected version of the now-defunct Milton County, which was enveloped into Fulton to save it from bankruptcy during the Great Depression.

In classic Southern fashion, the battle over Milton pits North against South in a tumultuous debate involving race, money, and politics.

**Why bother to revive a county that's been gone for 75 years?** "Fulton County is a broken government that cannot be fixed—it's too big and unwieldy. It has some of the highest per capita taxes in the country but supplies the poorest level of service," says Representative Jan Jones (R-Alpharetta), author of the legislation.

**But what's with amending the constitution? Can't we just create the new county?** Georgia is constitutionally mandated to limit the number of

counties to 159, but the bill on the table has a loophole of sorts, allowing for a constitutional amendment that would permit formerly existing counties to be revived.

**What would the new Milton County look like?** It would likely include all the areas north of Atlanta, including Alpharetta, Sandy Springs, Roswell, Johns Creek, Milton, and Mountain Park. Buckhead may or may not be included. Milton would have a population of about 300,000 mostly white, mostly Republican residents, making it the fifth largest county in the state and one of the richest.

**What about Fulton?** The new Fulton, likely renamed "Atlanta County," would go from being the largest county in the state to the fourth largest and would mostly be African American and Democratic and would include some of the metro area's most impoverished neighborhoods.

**So does it come down to racial and financial motivations?** "Absolutely not," insists Jones. "This is about people wanting a smaller local government that they can impact. Sandy Springs is 35 percent minority, but the measure to make it a city passed there 96 percent. Support for this supersedes race or party lines."

Outspoken opponent Senator Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta) disagrees. "Most of these wealthy areas are predominantly white, and their attitude is that they don't want their tax dollars going

to poor black people," he says. "This is about making north Fulton County some gated community that can't be penetrated. I've read the blogs on this issue, and there's no question. Many of the supporters use racial slurs in their commentary."

**Is this bad news for Grady Memorial Hospital and MARTA's funding?** Fulton has a contractual agreement to contribute financially to Grady through 2013. Fulton's contract with MARTA runs through 2047. These obligations are not likely to go away with the creation of a new county. It would be up to leaders from both counties and both entities to decide how these obligations would be seen through, although long-term funding could ultimately be jeopardized.

**Where does the bill stand now?** It's before a senate committee on government affairs. "We're also in the process of conducting studies to look into the long-term implications of all this," adds Jones, noting that they will likely look into the financial impact and how the old Fulton's assets would be divided. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate. (Republicans do not currently have two-thirds of either chamber.) It could take another year—or years—to garner the necessary support. Once those hurdles are cleared, voters would have their say in a statewide vote. ★