

Druid Hills Survey
On Annexation/Cityhood Choices
Preliminary Report
Nov. 12, 2014

Background on the survey

In the months ahead, Druid Hills may be facing a historic decision. Briefly, it has three choices:

- Seek annexation to the city of Atlanta.
- Join with Briarcliff and Lakeside in forming a new city.
- Remain part of unincorporated DeKalb County.

In defining its own role in this historic decision, the Druid Hills Civic Association sought to hear from Druid Hills residents about these choices in a survey conducted from Oct. 31 to Nov. 10 (10 days).

The DHCA Survey Committee managed the survey process and design. It was designed with four values in mind:

- To be **objective**, so that it did not steer people to one choice or another.
- To be **reliable**, so that we could be assured that only Druid Hills residents took the survey and the results were safeguarded from “ballot stuffing.”
- To be **realistic**. It was designed knowing that many residents still occupy a “low-information” environment about Druid Hills’ choices. Thus, we asked questions about outcomes and factors, not about what is still largely unknowable, which is how residents might vote in a hypothetical referendum at a future date.
- To be **user-friendly**. We wanted a survey people could take easily, asking questions that any resident could answer.

We settled on a two-part effort: To queue the survey and provide a security mechanism, we sent postcards to every household in Druid Hills. Each postcard contained a unique login code. Recipients were directed to an online survey. To take the survey, they had to enter their login code.

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We mailed postcards to all Druid Hills residents, including those living in Atlanta and Decatur. The login codes allowed us to segment Atlanta and Decatur respondents from those who may actually vote in a referendum (the residents of unincorporated DeKalb County). Here is a breakdown of postcards mailed, surveys taken, and the response rates.

	Postcards	Responses	Resp. Rate
Atlanta	526	53	10%
Decatur	9	1	11%
Unincorp.	3141	828	26%
Total	3676	882	24%

As you can see, **the overall response rate was 24%**, which is considered very good for this kind of survey. Worth noting: 85% of the postcards were mailed to unincorporated DeKalb addresses but 94% of the respondents were from unincorporated DeKalb. Since this is a decision that affects only the unincorporated areas, this is exactly what you would expect.

The survey asked two types of questions. First, it asked about the respondent's "level of comfort" with each of the three choices Druid Hills faces. Second, it asked how respondents would rate five factors in considering the options facing Druid Hills. Each question could be answered using a five-point scale from "Highly important" to "Not important at all," or "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree." Finally, the survey offered space for optional comments.

There were eight questions in all. We estimated that it took the average respondent five minutes or less to answer all of them.

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The choices facing Druid Hills

In the first set of questions, we asked recipients to describe their level of comfort with the three choices. Here is how the questions were worded:

1. I am comfortable with Druid Hills joining the existing city of Atlanta.
2. I am comfortable with Druid Hills joining Briarcliff/Lakeside in forming a new city.
3. I am comfortable with Druid Hills remaining part of unincorporated DeKalb County.

Each question was followed by five answers: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neutral/Not sure, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree. For the purpose of analyzing the results, we turned these responses into a 1-5 scale, with 1 being “Strongly disagree”, 5 being “Strongly agree” and 3 being “Neutral/Not sure.”

The results

We wanted to know the mean or average for each answer, using our 1-5 scale. (Again, 1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). Here are the averages:

Annexation	3.13
Cityhood	2.16
Unincorp.	3.16

This indicates to us that annexation or remaining in unincorporated DeKalb are acceptable outcomes at this point to most taking the survey, but joining Briarcliff/Lakeside in forming a new city is not.

We also wanted to know the range and depth of opinions on these choices. Were there deep divisions about these choices or did people pretty much feel the same way? Here is the distribution of opinions for each choice:

Annexation		
Strongly Disagree	250	28%
Somewhat Disagree	83	9%
Neutral/Not Sure	96	11%
Somewhat Agree	210	24%
Strongly Agree	243	28%

Unincorp.		
Strongly Disagree	168	19%
Somewhat Disagree	164	19%
Neutral/Not Sure	138	16%
Somewhat Agree	180	20%
Strongly Agree	232	26%

Cityhood		
Strongly Disagree	418	47%
Somewhat Disagree	133	15%
Neutral/Not Sure	163	18%
Somewhat Agree	108	12%
Strongly Agree	60	7%

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Our interpretation

What do these results tell the DHCA Board? We draw four conclusions:

- There is little desire among Druid Hills residents to join Briarcliff and Lakeside in creating a new city. The DHCA Board may wish to notify the organizers of that effort that they should not include Druid Hills in their initiative.
- At this point, Druid Hills residents see annexation into Atlanta or remaining in unincorporated DeKalb County as acceptable.
- There are, however, strong differences of opinion on both these outcomes, and particularly on the annexation option. 28% of those surveyed said they “strongly disagreed” with the annexation outcome; another 28% “strongly agreed” with it. (Opinions were a bit more moderate about remaining in unincorporated DeKalb.)
- A referendum on annexation into Atlanta is likely to produce strong debate for and against. This makes it, in our opinion, highly important that the DHCA Board define its role carefully in events leading to a referendum decision and during the referendum campaign itself.

Atlanta-DeKalb divisions

Were there differences in how Druid Hills residents already in Atlanta viewed these options compared to those in unincorporated DeKalb? There were (they tended to more strongly favor annexation, more firmly oppose cityhood) but their numbers were not great enough to affect significantly the overall results. Here are the mean or averages for the three options:

	Annex	Cityhood	Unincorp.
Atlanta residents	3.57	1.77	3.21
Unincorp. residents	3.10	2.19	3.16
Combined	3.13	2.16	3.16

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Factors residents see as important

The second set of questions asked residents to rate a group of factors that they might use in considering the choices facing the neighborhood. Here’s how these questions were phrased:

In considering the options facing Druid Hills, these factors are important to me:

4. The **school system** that Druid Hills’ schools (Druid Hills High, Briar Vista Elementary, Fernbank Elementary) belong to.
5. The effect the decision has on the **taxes** I pay.
6. The effect the decision has on **public safety and other public services**.
7. That **Emory University’s campus** remains in the same jurisdiction as the Druid Hills neighborhood.
8. The jurisdiction’s commitment to preserving the **Druid Hills Historic District**.

Each question was followed by five answers: Highly important, Somewhat important, Neutral/Not sure, Not very important, Not important at all. For the purpose of analyzing the results, we turned these responses into a 1-5 scale, with 1 being “Strongly disagree”, 5 being “Strongly agree” and 3 being “Neutral/Not sure.”

The results

We wanted to know the mean or average for each answer, using our 1-5 scale. (Again, 1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). Here are the averages:

Schools	4.30
Taxes	4.21
Services	4.49
Emory	3.74
Historic Dist.	4.08

This indicates to us that all of these factors are important to Druid Hills residents and should form the basis of conversations with the city of Atlanta and DeKalb County officials.

As with the annexation/cityhood options facing Druid Hills, we wanted to know the range and depth of opinions on these choices. Were there deep divisions about these choices or did people pretty much feel the same way? Here is the distribution of opinions for each choice:

Schools			Taxes		
Not Important At All	41	5%	Not Important At All	18	2%
Not Very Important	43	5%	Not Very Important	60	7%
Neutral/Not Sure	65	7%	Neutral/Not Sure	78	9%
Somewhat Important	198	22%	Somewhat Important	286	32%
Highly Important	535	61%	Highly Important	440	50%

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Services		
Not Important At All	6	1%
Not Very Important	26	3%
Neutral/Not Sure	54	6%
Somewhat Important	237	27%
Highly Important	559	63%

Emory		
Not Important At All	85	10%
Not Very Important	72	8%
Neutral/Not Sure	165	19%
Somewhat Important	222	25%
Highly Important	338	38%

Hist. Dist.		
Not Important At All	43	5%
Not Very Important	68	8%
Neutral/Not Sure	101	11%
Somewhat Important	231	26%
Highly Important	439	50%

Our interpretation

What do these results tell the DHCA Board. We draw three conclusions:

- These five factors will be important to Druid Hills residents in making their own decisions about what the neighborhood should do in the future.
- Unlike the choices about annexation, cityhood and unincorporation, there is little divided opinion about these factors. The factor that ranked lowest (remaining in the same jurisdiction as Emory University) had only 18% of respondents who considered it “not very important” or “not important at all.” A clear majority considered it “somewhat important” or “highly important.”
- These factors could form the basis for the DHCA Board’s role in the annexation discussions to come. That is, one role could be to investigate and report on how annexation or continued unincorporation would affect these five factors.

Atlanta-DeKalb divisions

Again, we wanted to know if there were significant differences between how Druid Hills residents already in Atlanta viewed these factors compared to those in unincorporated DeKalb. There were some (they were less concerned about the schools but more concerned about the Historic District) but the differences were not enough to affect significantly the overall results.

	Schools	Taxes	Services	Emory	Hist.Dist.
Atlanta residents	3.89	4.06	4.53	3.83	4.42
Unincorp. residents	4.33	4.23	4.50	3.74	4.07
Combined	4.30	4.21	4.49	3.74	4.08

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Optional comments

We included a text box on the online survey for respondents to offer optional comments and suggestions. 294 of the 882 respondents offered a comment (33%).

The vast majority of comments were about four subjects: the choices facing Druid Hills (i.e., for or against annexation, cityhood or remaining unincorporated); the factors that residents will consider (schools, taxes, services, etc.); other ideas (such as joining Decatur instead); and DHCA itself (both praise and criticism).

Comments about the choices

These were by far the most heated. As the data indicated, Druid Hills residents have strong opinions for and against joining the city of Atlanta, and for or against remaining part of unincorporated DeKalb. Here is a sampling:

We feel that there is no best option given that DeKalb county government is dysfunctional and broke financially. There seems to be no political leadership. Given this reality, we think that joining the city of Atlanta is the best solution.

We feel that nothing would be gained by being a city or by joining another city. In particular, we do NOT want to be part of Atlanta. The idea of having to go to downtown Atlanta for minor things that we now can do in Decatur. LEAVE THINGS ALONE on this issue!

We believe Druid Hills Historic District and unincorporated DeKalb county should go to the city. The public services are much nicer. Maybe Briarcliff road will get good sidewalks in the City of Atlanta, and streetlights are needed down Lullwater Rd especially. Villa Park should also be reestablished.

Vehemently opposed to joining city of Atlanta. It would be the worse thing Druid Hills could do. We must oppose joining Atlanta. We would be crazy to do so. Unincorporated DeKalb is much better!!

We affirm that Atlanta is moving in a good direction and we would welcome the opportunity for DH to join it. The city's initiatives around important issues such as public transit, infrastructure investment, school reform, and neighborhood-level planning are the primary drivers of our position.

I will sell my house and move to Vinings before I'll be annexed by the city of Atlanta. I refuse to be governed by its incompetent, racist, high taxes administration, but wait, I'm already in a jurisdiction with a government with all those attributes, plus criminal.

Comments about factors

Some respondents took the opportunity to express their concerns about some of the factors included on the survey. Here is a sampling:

We are interested in Druid Hills joining the city of Atlanta as long as Druid Hills schools (Fernbank, Druid Hills High), go with us and the Druid Hills Historic District is preserved.

We moved to Druid Hills for Fernbank Elementary School for our children. I am a graduate of ATL Pub Schools & my mother was also a teacher there. APS schools have mediocre teachers and apathetic parents/children. PLEASE do not allow Fernbank to become polluted in the same manner that so many APS schools are.

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The school district is the most important. We have been told by home appraisers that the value of our home is dependent on the school district in which we reside.

We are low income seniors and have a DeKalb County H4 property tax senior exemption with no school taxes. We don't want to be a part of ANY city unless we would also not have to pay the city school taxes. If our property taxes go up considerably, we will have to move from our home of 28 years.

The taxes are the single most important consideration. Although the DeKalb administration leaves much to be desired, there's no guarantee that higher taxes through Atlanta annexation will bring any benefits.

Taxes and safety are our biggest concern. It seems that splitting up unincorporated DeKalb would predictably increase taxes, provide uncertainty regarding public safety and degrade our schools.

Emory University, CDC, Historic Druid Hills neighborhoods and our schools must remain together no matter what. Our community draws its strength from this synergistic relationship.

The concept that Emory University should be able to dictate the municipal character of Druid Hills is offensive. It should be subject to the will of its neighbors - not the other way around.

Comments offering other ideas

Some respondents had suggestions beyond what was offered on the survey. Here are two:

Situation is a mess because of "land grab" going on. State legislature should stop entire process. Staying in unincorporated DeKalb is fine but not if inaction makes us worse off. We shouldn't miss the boat on others incorporating around us. The entire mess is a real "prisoner's dilemma."

Our first preference would be to join the City of Decatur. They have a wonderful community and a strong commitment to an excellent school system, resulting in a thriving city. Whatever happens with Druid Hills, we hope it looks something like that.

Comments about DHCA

Finally, there was praise and criticism for DHCA itself. Here are a few examples:

Thank you Druid Hills Civic Association for soliciting the opinions of the residents of Druid Hills. Your efforts to represent us are appreciated.

Thank you DHCA for taking leadership in this matter. We are particularly interested in having more control over planning and zoning and having strong public education. We hope future surveys will allow each adult in the household to respond in order to better reflect varying views.

Thanks for all the work on this issue. It seems that DHCA communications are somewhat biased toward joining city of Atlanta. It is important that the DHCA represent the views of all residents, not just perspectives of some. This survey is a step in the right direction.

The Civic Association seems to be pushing the City of Atlanta option. You have not made the case as to why this is the best option. I'd follow your lead, but it isn't clear why any of the options are better than the others. Thus, I'll stick with the status quo.