

A new era for Smiths Station

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Staff Writer

After a decade of explosive growth, Smiths Station finally became a city this year. But what happens next remains cloudy.

Some 4,100 acres of land covering 6 1/2 miles in the Smiths Station area was incorporated by a narrow 578-534 margin in a Dec. 7 referendum. It ended the third major attempt in the last 20 years to make Smiths, or parts of it, a city.

Slightly less than half of eligible voters, who had to live within the proposed city limits to take part in the referendum, cast ballots.

Voters defeated incorporation by a two-to-one margin in 1988, and a 1980 incorporation effort never reached a vote.

During the past decade, Smiths saw its population increase nearly 10-fold, as people who worked in Auburn, Opelika, Phenix City or Columbus, Ga. began moving there to recapture a small-town life.

What was a tiny hamlet of about 2,000 just a decade ago is now a booming community of anywhere from 22,000 to 28,000 people.

Pro- and anti-incorporation forces made their voices heard the day of the voting, standing outside the polling place, Smiths Station Ruritan Club, and handing out leaflets to passers-by. Signs urging "Yes" and "No" votes were planted along roadways and at businesses.

Jimmy Milligan said he moved to Smiths in



THE YEAR IN REVIEW

1986 to escape the high property taxes and increased government he claimed will come to Smiths Station if the area becomes a city.

"If we wanted more government, we'd move back to Columbus or Phenix City," he said as he stood among a group of anti-incorporation Smiths residents.

James Shaw, who has lived in Smiths Station for four decades, saw cityhood as a chance for the community to help itself grow through community development block grants and a governing body such as a city council.

"I go with progress," he said. "We need things we can't get as (an unincorporated) com-

munity. You've got to have some revenue coming in."

For about three years leading up to the vote, a pro-incorporation group, the Smiths Unity Campaign, sought signatures for a petition asking residents to support a city referendum.

To have a vote, at least 60 percent of property owners had to sign, and at least four registered voters had to live on each 40-acre parcel in the city area.

By last summer, some 1,100 signatures had been gathered. The petition and a map showing the proposed city area were submitted to Lee County officials. A voting date was set for Sept. 21.

But less than two weeks before that day, the vote was scrapped after it was revealed that some of the land on the map had been annexed into Phenix City at the property owner's request in 1998.

Under law, no land that is part of one city can become part of another. The map was printed before the annexation had been approved.

An updated petition and map were given to county officials in November, but Smiths resident Lloyd Brannon, who pointed out the previous map's discrepancies, tried to have the referendum stopped again, saying the petition contained signatures of people who had passed away or moved from Smiths after they signed it.

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UNINCORPORATED
Growth
Depending on where
you draw lines,
various sources indicate
a population of
20,000 - 32,000

Very little
COMMERCIAL
DEVELOPMENT
serves this
POPULATION!!

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