

First Incorporation Town Hall Meeting Recap

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Approximately 300 island residents turned out for The Landings Association's first Incorporation Town Hall Meeting to discuss the findings of the five Incorporation Study Committees on November 27.

Landing Association Board President Jim Rich opened the meeting and welcomed all in attendance. He then explained the overall purpose of the meeting was to present the results of the study and determine if the island community wants the opportunity to vote whether to become a city.

Rich noted that over the past few months, five Study Committees focused on whether Skidaway Island as a city could provide the same or higher level of service for equal or fewer tax dollars as Chatham County. To do so, the Study Committees examined the areas of Tax/Finance, Governance/Administration, Police/Court, Public Works/Engineering, and Planning/Zoning.

Rich shared with the group that incorporation has been talked about at least four times over the past 15 years and "exploring incorporation" was one of the goals in The Landings Association's Strategic Plan.

However, incorporation had not been explored as in depth as with the Financial Feasibility Study conducted in 2016 by the Andrew Young School at Georgia State University. This study looked at two sets of data estimates as well as local cities and similar-sized cities in Georgia, many in the Atlanta area, that have been formed in the last 13 years. The overall conclusion of the feasibility study showed that it would be financially feasible for Skidaway Island to become a city, and the Study Committees were formed to further examine costs and services.

"These Incorporation Town Hall Meetings will help gauge if the island community, which includes The Landings, Modena, South Harbor, The Marshes, and residents along Green Island Road, would like the opportunity to vote on becoming a city," Rich said. "We were fortunate to receive more than 80 volunteers interested in serving on the various Study Committees. Those who were not chosen to serve on a specific committee served on focus groups. We thank all of them for their hard work over the past six months."

Rich reminded attendees that if Skidaway Island becomes a city, there would be no change to The Landings Association, The Landings Club, South Harbor, Modena, The Marshes, The State Park, the school system, The Skidaway Institute, or the City of Savannah. He added that everyone's mailing addresses would remain Savannah, Georgia.

If Skidaway Island were to incorporate, the city would become responsible for all areas of the Special Services District (SSD), including police, rights-of-way maintenance, yard debris pickup, roads and bridges, stormwater management, Planning and Zoning, Records Court, and General Governmental Services. Much of these services would be performed on a contractual basis.

Rich then introduced Kathy Siler, Chair of the Incorporation Steering Committee. She recognized the members of the Study Committees and asked those in attendance to stand. She then explained the overall findings of the Study Committees which included the following key points:

- The City of Skidaway Island could provide the same or better services for fewer tax dollars.
- There is potential for revenue of \$8.5 million with projected expenditures of \$6.5 million.

- Annual net revenues for the City of Skidaway would come to \$2,030,037.
- There would be a one-time startup cost for the city of \$970,500.
- In the first year, the City of Skidaway would be able to start a Reserve Fund.

Siler explained that with incorporation, residents would see a 17 percent decrease in Special Service District taxes and that the yard debris removal fee currently paid to Chatham County would be eliminated. Also, part of the Local Option Sales Tax (LOST) paid to the County would be redirected to the City of Skidaway Island. LOST is the one percent sales tax that offsets property tax millage rate.

Siler shared the highlights of the findings of each committee:

- The City of Skidaway would have to establish police in some form. This could be achieved by forming its own police department or contracting with Chatham County. At the recent Landings Legislative Roundtable, the County expressed interest in further discussing the issue of contracting police services if incorporation was determined to be the direction residents of Skidaway Island would like to take.
- If a new police department was formed, it would include positions for Chief, Sergeant, Detective, Training Officer, Patrol Officers, and a Clerical position.
- The City also would include an on-island Municipal Court in charge of city ordinances and traffic violations. There would be part-time positions for a judge, attorney, public defender, and a customer service representative/court clerk.
- The City of Skidaway Island would collect Southside Fire subscriptions at tax time instead of separate billing. This would just be a pass-through billing, with no tax or fee increase.
- The City could provide operational support to The Village Library. Supplementing The Village Library with an annual fee would help the library with its financials and be one of the three services needed for the City of Skidaway Island to qualify for LOST funds. However, there would be no change to the day-to-day operations of the Library.
- The City of Skidaway would be divided into four districts for voting purposes. A mayor would be elected at large as well as a council member to represent each of the districts.
- If police services were contracted with Chatham County, there would be only five City employees, based on Study Committees reviews.
- There would need to be a place for City Hall. One option for City Hall is to rent space in The Village. This is the scenario that the Governance/Administration Study Committee used in its research, as it is the highest cost and, therefore, the most conservative approach.
- In the area of Planning/Zoning, there would be a paid position for one Building Inspector.

The City of Skidaway would adopt existing State and County ordinances, to begin with, and then modify as needed, according to Siler. She added that the conclusion of the committees is that the pros of incorporation far outweigh the cons.

“The largest benefit is that we as residents would have home rule,” Siler said. “Your leaders will be right here on this island and not sprinkled throughout Chatham County, with some being as far as 27 miles or more away. Then there is the benefit of increased service levels and a

greater share of tax dollars with a decrease in tax fees. Not to mention, we will eliminate the possibility of future involuntary annexation.”

Siler said the groups identified only one specific downside to incorporation, and that is the potential short-term loss of up to 25 percent flood insurance discount that some owners currently have.

“Some residents receive a discount on flood insurance, and others don’t,” Siler said. “It also is important to note that not every person with a discount gets a 25 percent savings. When you become a city, you lose your Community Rating System and must work to get it back. However, we anticipate this to be a short-term side-effect and already are reviewing options to address this issue.”

Siler added that many people are confused and think that Chatham County will lose all taxes if Skidaway Island incorporates.

“We still would pay taxes to Chatham County for the General Fund, Schools, and Transportation, as does everyone no matter where they live,” she said. “What we wouldn’t pay the County is SSD dollars, which would be redirected to the City of Skidaway Island. The biggest chunk of the millage still will go to Chatham County. However, we will pay less in taxes, based on last year’s figures.”

Siler told the group that feedback is being reviewed, and in December the entire island community (The Landings, South Harbor, Modena, Green Island Road, and The Marshes residents) will decide whether to move forward with a vote.

If the island community decides to proceed with incorporation, the next steps will look like this:

- January 2018 - Work with State Representative Jesse Petrea and State Senator Ben Watson to finalize a Draft City Charter
- January - April 2018 - Receive approval from State Legislature and Governor allowing a vote
- November 6, 2018 - Skidaway Island vote (registered Skidaway Island voters only)
- March 19, 2019 - If vote passes, elect first Mayor and City Council (nonpartisan)
- July 2019 - July 2021 - City services phase in over up to two-year period beginning July 1, 2019

Attendees in favor of having the opportunity to vote on incorporation were asked to indicate their interest by a show of hands. Almost 100 percent of those in attendance raised their hands.

If you missed this meeting, the schedule for the remaining Incorporation Town Hall Meetings is as follows:

- Monday, December 4 - 10 a.m. at Plantation’s Ballroom
- Monday, December 4 - 4 p.m. at Plantation’s Ballroom
- Monday, December 4 - 7 p.m. at Plantation’s Ballroom
- Tuesday, December 5 - 10:30 a.m. at The Marshes of Skidaway

To find out more about the potential incorporation of Skidaway Island, including reading a detailed report of the Study Committees, the Andrew Young Financial Feasibility Study, the Current Draft City Charter, and district maps, please visit Landings.org/Incorporation or SkidawayCityStudy.org/content/resources.