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Crime fears emerge in Johns Creek, Sandy Springs municipal elections



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NORTH FULTON COUNTY

By **Adrianne Murchison**, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Support for police and fears of rising crime have become dominant topics for candidates fighting to win office in two north Fulton cities. For several weeks, city council candidates in Johns Creek and Sandy Springs have pointed to Atlanta crime and protests that turned violent to try to sway voters.

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That Atlanta Journal-Constitution has reported that after a historically deadly 2020, Atlanta homicides are up nearly 60% in 2021.

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Now, north Fulton candidates in nonpartisan races are publicly urging residents to vote for them or risk seeing their cities becoming home to chaos and lawlessness.

The latest is a Sandy Springs flyer from the Fulton Republican Party stating, “We can’t let Sandy Springs turn into another Atlanta.” The flyer supports five candidates: Mayor Rusty Paul, Councilmembers John Paulson and Tibby DeJulio and council candidates Jeff Howe and

Melissa Mular. It displays photos of police standing in front of protesters along with shuttered and boarded up apartments.

Similar campaign material is circulating in Johns Creek. Mayoral candidate John Bradberry, who is supported by the Fulton GOP, said he believes a flyer that reads, "...Save Johns Creek from the partisan group targeting Johns Creek to radically change our quality of life" was created by a group of residents who don't want Democratic-aligned candidates taking over the city.

The flyers were distributed to voters throughout the north Fulton cities.

Emory University Political Scientist Dr. Andra Gillespie said the use of law and order on campaigns has long been interpreted by political scientists as a racial trope. The strategy is referred to as "code" or "dog whistles" that go back to Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign and more recently the 2020 election, she said.

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"Law and order" is racially neutral, Gillespie said, but when it's infused with present-day cultural meaning and thoughts about crime and violence, it becomes racial.

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"Nixon knew he couldn't run on overtly racist language," she added. "But he could invoke the stereotype (of people of color) in a neutral way ...When people are referencing Atlanta directly - a city that is still majority African American, it's implicating White flight and it's hard to deny there are racial undertones."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

During the election season, Sandy Springs City Council candidates of color have described the campaign language by Republicans as racially charged, but Fulton County Republican Party Chairman Trey Kelly said he disagrees.

“My take on that is race has nothing to do with it,” Kelly said Tuesday. “That’s a narrative that the Democrats push regularly. People move to Sandy Springs and Johns Creek because they don’t want to be part of a big urban city run by Democrats that produce high taxes and high crime.”

Kelly said Atlanta is one such city.

He added that this year is the first time the Fulton GOP has distributed campaign materials supporting municipal candidates. The move was in response to the Fulton County Democrats party endorsing a group of candidates, he said.

Kelly forwarded a copy of a flyer produced by Fulton County Democrats endorsing mayoral candidate Dontaye Carter, and City Council candidates Megan Harris, Dr. Melody Kelley and Leslie Mullis.

The flyer reads, “It’s time for our city council to have members that represent all of us. The Fulton Democrats are endorsing these candidates based on their platform positions.”

Juliette Hartel, North Fulton district chair of the Fulton County Democratic Party, said the organization has endorsed individual candidates and connected them with volunteers and other people interested in their platforms. There is no coordinated effort to promote a slate of candidates as stated on the GOP flyer, she said.

“(The candidates) are not the same and you can tell that when you go to their websites,” Hartel said of the endorsed Democratic candidates. “If you watched the debates, their platforms are not the same.”

Lee Tucker, chairman of the Fulton County Democratic Party, is running for the Johns Creek City Council Post 1 seat. Hartel said Tucker is not involved in activities related to the Nov. 2 election or races and those duties are being managed by the party Vice Chairman Sean Calahan.

In Johns Creek, Bradberry said concerns about a rise in crime are not dog whistles.

“If (Democrats) talk of changing (the city) into something radically different from what people have come to know and love in Johns Creek, naturally there is going to be a reaction,” Bradberry said in reference to the “Save Johns Creek” flyer.

His opponent, Johns Creek mayoral candidate Brian Weaver, who is Black, said he believes the flyer is racially motivated.

“It’s unfortunate that some of these candidates are trying to divide the city,” Weaver said. “It’s sending a message that’s more divisive than inclusive.”

Weaver said false comments have been made by Johns Creek City Council candidate Bob Erramilli about his support for the police. Weaver is a retired senior commander with the Johns Creek Police Department and endorsed by the Fulton County Democratic Party.

Erramilli, who is of Indian descent, said during a call with the AJC that supporting police and preventing crime was central to his platform. He was critical of Weaver kneeling during a 2020 protest after the death of George Floyd. Weaver, who was serving on Johns Creek City Council at time, said he was attending one of the numerous protests held by local high school students and alongside him was a police officer. Other elected officials also attended the protest, he said.

“That triggered an alarm bell in me,” Erramilli said, of Weaver kneeling. “He can’t be taking a knee at an anti-police march ...That’s effectively saying, ‘I have no confidence in law enforcement to take care of my communities.’”

Weaver said the law and order conversation against candidates adds to the negative campaign tone in Johns Creek.

“What Bob said is totally irresponsible and disappointing,” Weaver said. “Me kneeling was not anything against the police. He’s out of touch and doesn’t understand.”

Hartel said candidates aligned with both parties have the same kind of support for police.

“I do know they all support police and public safety and want more funding,” Hartel said. “And that’s across the board for any candidate, Republican and Democrat.”

About the Author

The Atlanta
Journal-Constitution

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Adrianne Murchison covers local government in north Fulton County for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

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