

Pursuing Cityhood

An Interview with Bill White, Volunteer Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Buckhead City Committee

EDITORS' NOTE Bill White is the Volunteer Chairman and CEO of the Buckhead City Committee (BCC), a volunteer group of Buckhead residents, business owners and supporters determined to create Buckhead City, Georgia. White's career started in his family's restaurant and real estate business and evolved to fundraising, consulting, community engagement, business and philanthropy. In 1991, White founded Operation Support, a 501(c)(3), all-volunteer group of young professionals dedicated to raising awareness and funds for families of wounded and fallen veterans. Philanthropist and real estate mogul Zachary Fisher recruited White as his chief of staff and, ultimately, to lead the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum in New York City. Under White's leadership, nearly \$1 billion was raised for the museum's renovation and for grievously injured veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. During White's tenure, annual museum visitors climbed from 200,000 to over 1 million. White co-founded the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund, a successful and respected charitable organization thriving today which supports wounded and fallen servicemembers and their families. In 2010, White founded Constellations Group, a business development firm to advise leaders and connect them to strategic partners, funding and counsel. White has been vetted for key positions in presidential administrations of both political parties. He coordinated bipartisan



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legislation with Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator John McCain that boosted the death benefit for servicemembers killed in action from \$6,000 to \$500,000 (tax exempt). White has business partnerships with entrepreneur Mark Wahlberg in his water bottle company, Aquahydrate, and is a partner in the successful Ghost Lifestyle brand. Accolades include decorations from the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard; The Knight (Cavaliere) of the Republic of Italy; and the Life Saving Benevolent Association's top honor for rescuing a woman drowning in the Hudson River. White is a graduate of the French Culinary Institute and holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Fordham University.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Buckhead City Committee (becnow.com) is a nonpartisan organization comprised of a group of diverse residents and business owners in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta who want the best for their community. This grassroots initiative aims to vastly improve public safety, reduce crime, gain local control of zoning, enhance maintenance of infrastructure, and beautify area parks and recreational facilities in Buckhead. It consults with leaders of law enforcement, city services, zoning, education and stakeholders in small and big businesses to develop best practices for the new city of Buckhead City.

You lead the Buckhead City Committee. What is the mission of the BCC and will you discuss its efforts?

For decades Buckhead has talked about becoming its own city to finally gain control over zoning, taxes and crime that has exponentially increased over the past three years. Buckhead has repeatedly lost their choice in Atlanta's Mayor and the City Hall of Atlanta has neglected the needs and demands of Buckhead, while increasing the taxes. Neighboring cities like Brookhaven, Dunwoody and Sandy Springs have all incorporated as their own city and formed their own police departments – all have been tremendously successful. Buckhead residents want:

1. Taxation with representation.
2. To form its own police force of 250 officers – this is based on the FBI quota per 100,000 residents. This is triple what Atlanta assigns to Buckhead Community now.
3. To pay our officers the highest in the state and give them their own take-home car and stipend to live in Buckhead. This will recruit and retain the best and will also help deter criminals because more police cars on the road prevents crime.
4. To institute tough municipal courts that crack down on crimes like street racing, smash and grabs, noise, late night antics and more.
5. To control zoning, which protects the tree canopy Buckhead is known for. Atlanta wants to carve up lots and build small rental homes in developed neighborhoods – this will destroy the

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look and feel of Buckhead and increase the already horrible traffic conditions.

6. To fix Buckhead roads which are in terrible condition with potholes everywhere. Buckhead City will repave major roads and maintain them.

7. To improve the safety and appearance of our parks and create more greenspace.

8. To protect and preserve what Buckhead is famous for – beautiful homes and trees, thriving businesses, the best restaurants by encouraging local businesses to open while keeping their patrons and employees safe. Almost every major restaurant in Buckhead is a supporter of Buckhead City because they have witnessed the deterioration of Buckhead.

What would be the characteristics and strengths of Buckhead if it became its own city?

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Atlanta will be better off because the 20 percent land mass Buckhead represents will no longer be its responsibility. The 90 Atlanta Police Department officers will no longer be assigned to Buckhead and can be reassigned

to Atlanta. Atlanta is currently having a very difficult time hiring officers and a Police Commissioner and are currently down over 300 officers city-wide.

How are you engaging the residents of Buckhead in the efforts of the Buckhead City Committee?

We have received over 68 percent support of Buckhead residents in our mission for cityhood. Most residents are fed up with the corruption and crime in Atlanta and have witnessed how Sandy Springs and Brookhaven have created successful cities without harming Atlanta. Through local and national traditional and social media, Buckhead City Committee has engaged residents and the entire State of Georgia in our movement. Most recently, we had an advisory question on our movement in the GOP Primary and 80.4 percent of voters said they believe we should have the right to vote. We have become very political as well, helping educate legislators and candidates about our cityhood movement. They ultimately help put our movement on the ballot and we are working with the Georgia State Legislature to be on the ballot in 2023.

Are you optimistic about the chances for Buckhead becoming its own city?

Very. Six months into the term of the new Mayor of Atlanta, crime has worsened, and we all realize that, in order to implement real change in Buckhead, we must form our own city. We have formed an incredible team of volunteers, lobbyists, attorneys, bond and school experts. We have legislators who openly support our

right to vote. We are polling exceptionally well. We have done a feasibility study that shows we are more than feasible, without hurting Atlanta. Everyone is excited to hire 270 new police officers for Buckhead alone – that number meets federal standards for our population. We have 90 now with Atlanta so we are 180 short in Buckhead alone.

Do you feel that Buckhead has strong awareness and what more can be done to tell the Buckhead story?

We have compiled a mailing list of 4,000 supporters. Our polls and the recent vote in the GOP Primary prove we have very strong awareness. The media has recognized this as a major story because of the violent crime. Buckhead is at a crossroads – many have moved away, but most want to fight to have our right to vote before giving up. Buckhead City Committee will continue to fight for our right to vote because we know it is the best thing for all of Atlanta and, like I’ve said earlier, we aren’t reinventing the wheel here. Our neighbors in Brookhaven and Sandy Springs both agree that it’s the only option and that it works. Joe Gebbia, who helped create Brookhaven and just finished a successful term as its mayor *pro temp*, wrote a very inspiring op ed to the people of Buckhead encouraging them to stay the course for cityhood. As he notes, Brookhaven took three years and it is now flourishing. We will continue our efforts engaging everyone in the community to garner more support and understanding of what we are trying to do for us all and our families. ●

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