

Lawrenceville or Virginia Highlands? Is it finally time to move?

By David R. Altman



I have a friend who says true freedom is when the kids are gone and the dogs are dead. While I don't necessarily agree with the dogs part (we miss ours greatly) I do think there's something to be said about how life changes once the kids are gone. And one issue that invariably comes up is whether to forsake the suburbs for in-town living.

One of our daughters lives in the Virginia Highlands area of Atlanta. She loves it there and we do, too. Especially when we visit her--and then come home to Gwinnett. It seems like at least once a year, we go through debating whether to leave Gwinnett and head for the Highlands (not the one in North Carolina).

We debate the differences.

Virginia Highlands is a great neighborhood with very old houses and lots of very old trees and thirty somethings who walk their dogs and run with their headsets on and go through the Starbucks drive-through on their way to work in their Toyota Prius' (or, more likely, their BMW One Series). It has character and great food and store fronts that seldom change. It's truly a community--like some of us knew as children (without, of course, the headsets and the hybrids).

In Lawrenceville, we make our coffee at home. We get up, watch Fox & Friends and, if we're not retired, we drive to work (alone) in our SUVs. We stop at Dunkin Doughnuts or McDonalds for coffee or Chick-Fil-A for a biscuit. If we are retired, we walk around the block wearing whatever we wore to bed. We also have headsets in Gwinnett, but they are used either by our still-at-home children or their children--some of whom are also living at home. Unlike the Highlands, we often have several generations living in one household.

Speaking of kids, you don't see too many in the Highlands. There are couples living there with no children, but that's not the main reason. The kids in the Highlands are all attending private schools. They are taken by carpool each day (their parents rotate car pool duty and take turns being 20 minutes late to their white collar jobs). They are carried door-to-door. After school, it's either French lessons or lacrosse practice they are spending time at, since there are no high school football games in the Highlands. All the students from the Highlands will attend major (out-of-state) universities and most will go on to graduate school, where they will later in life be heard to say, smugly, "...when I was an undergrad".

We have great private schools, too. In fact, according to High-Schools.com, three of Gwinnett's private schools rank in the Top 20 in the state in terms of enrollment (Greater Atlanta Christian is #1, Wesleyan School is #5 and Providence Christian Academy is #19). Not too shabby.

Friday night in Gwinnett has people watching football games and eating nachos.

Friday night in the Highlands has people sitting on outside patios checking their Blackberry's and iPhones (not for football scores) and sipping on one of those micro-beers whose names you cannot pronounce and you are sure it is from eastern Europe until you find it is brewed in Watkinville.

The food is better here in Gwinnett and more expensive in the Highlands. I will take any of the great dishes at Eagles Landing (on River Road) over the upscale snootiness of Murphy's on Virginia Avenue. And the burgers at Joes to Go in Lilburn get my vote over the (more publicized) ones at Moes and Joes. Finally, you can't beat the atmosphere on the square in Lawrenceville, where the chicken salad panini's at McCray's Tavern puts to shame anything you can order at Atkins Park (however, I will say that at El Taco on Highland Avenue still has the best chicken tacos anywhere).

Of course, this is metro Atlanta, after all, and there are similarities between Gwinnett and the Highlands. Take traffic, for instance. In that case, it's a matter of choosing your poison.

At rush hour in the Highlands, your car creeps along Highland Avenue between Virginia Ave. and E. Rock Springs at a snail's pace. I would think that anyone living in the Highlands would never have to car shop on-line, as they could instead just use any given rush hour to determine what sort of expensive car they would like to have next (since rush hour there resembles a Land Rover new car lot). Of course, many in-towners are busy texting or emailing while the traffic creeps along, giving them a competitive jump on their stressful day.

Gwinnett also has it's traffic problems, but most are on the interstate. Would you rather sit on I-85 or the Stone Mountain Freeway? Both offer equal opportunities to experience bumper-to-bumper stress. Of course, we now have the HOT lanes in and out of Gwinnett, which means you can save the money you would have used to send your kids to private schools and invest it in getting to work faster.

While the Highlands, much like New York City and San Francisco, is a great place to visit, we will still take Gwinnett. There is still too much good going on here to leave it for the Land of the Highlanders.

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