

## **Kennesaw sticks to its guns: Law requires firearms**

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A visitor could drive the length of Kennesaw and think it a lot like other fast-growing metro Atlanta communities.

Except for the Confederate flags that fly atop Wildman's Civil War Surplus Shop downtown and the presence of a certain famous train, not much sticks out among the modern housing developments and retail plazas.

But in one way, Kennesaw is different: Its residents are required to pack heat.

Next month, Kennesaw marks the 25th anniversary of what a local historian called the ordinance "that rocked the world."

Every head of household, the 1982 law states, must own a firearm and appropriate ammunition. It was passed, at least in part, in response to the actions of Morton Grove, Ill., which had just adopted an anti-gun ordinance.

If only people in the north Cobb County city took the law seriously.

"They'll say, 'Oh, yeah, I've got a gun — a water pistol!' " resident Richard Bracken explains. Some locals aren't even aware of the ordinance.

"I hadn't heard of it," said Mary Kopins, a seven-year resident.

"I am the head of the household — I mean, it's just me and my cat," Kopins said. "I hope that doesn't mean I have to go out and get a gun."

Legally, yes. But practically speaking, no.

"We don't have officers who go out and check your house to see if you have a gun," said police Lt. Craig Graydon, who has fielded calls about the ordinance from reporters in France, Australia and Japan. "The law gives you enough loopholes that you can get out of owning a gun."

Conscientious objectors to firearms, felons and persons with physical or mental disabilities are exempt. No one has ever been arrested for not having a gun, Graydon said, and there is no penalty for violating the ordinance.

He said there have been few accidental shootings in Kennesaw in his 20 years with the department, and none involving children.

Still, as Kennesaw continues to grow and cultivate a progressive, business-minded image, will there still be room for the "Wild West" image often associated with the ordinance?

Elected officials say they have no intention of getting rid of the gun law.

"We've come a long ways," said Mayor Leonard Church, himself a gun owner. "We have a lot more to offer than when that law was put on the books."

When the law was passed, Kennesaw was still a tiny outpost between U.S. 41 and I-75. It had come out of some hard economic times in the 1950s and was growing, boosted by the development of nearby Town Center Mall and, later, Kennesaw State University.

A local newspaper, recently writing about Kennesaw's efforts to update its image and attract more businesses and residents, referred to the city as "an educational, cultural and business hub."

Contrast that with a Penthouse magazine article from a couple decades back that showed five armed men standing in front of a Kennesaw city limits sign. The headline: "Gun Town."

Church, the mayor, points to the city's other assets.

He points to the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, home of the General, the Confederate locomotive stolen by Yankee spies in 1862 and the subject of the motion picture "The Great Train Robbery."

Church also mentions the Smith-Gilbert Arboretum and the potential of a downtown now made up of a few antique shops, cafes and Wildman's.

The latter is packed with authentic and replica Civil War memorabilia and is owned by local eccentric Dent Myers.

Long-haired and bearded, Myers wears a pair of .45s openly on his belt. A sign on the front of his shop advises, "Guns Allowed."

Church said neither the ordinance, nor some gun-totin' image, conflicts with the city's plans. "We're not looking to change [the law]," he said. "It's not going anywhere. I think it helps deter crime."

Police agree. "We look at it as part of our crime prevention program," Graydon said.

Police cite Kennesaw's crime statistics, which show a community largely untouched by the worst offenses like murder, rape, robbery and assault.

On a per capita basis, the city's serious crime rate has plunged since the law was passed. The actual number of the most serious crimes has barely increased, even as the city's population has exploded from about 5,000 in 1980 to more than 30,000 in 2005.

"We can't say it works, but the population has [grown]," Graydon said, "and we've maintained a very low crime rate."

That sits well with residents, whether they own a gun or not.

Bob Kotcher, 76, moved with his wife to Kennesaw from Hawaii in 2003 partly because of the crime rate.

"I'm not a gun kind of person, but we feel very secure here. I would guess that if the bad guys know there are guns and ammunition in the house, they would rather go someplace else."

Kotcher read about Kennesaw on the Internet while seeking a mainland location where his wife could study nursing and he could be close to relatives. He didn't hear about the ordinance until a local real estate agent mentioned it.

Kennesaw resident Lance Hamilton, himself a real estate agent, said he doesn't mention the law unless home shoppers ask. "If I were to bring up that law, I'd have to bring up every law." That doesn't mean he's not in favor of the ordinance, though.

"Personally, I think it's a good law," Hamilton said. "I think it makes Kennesaw unique."