



Unemployment rate tops in state

By Stuart Korfhage
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The employment situation in St. Johns County remained steady in July as it recorded the state's lowest unemployment rate.

Both St. Johns and Okaloosa counties had a rate of 3 percent each, followed by Walton County (3.1 percent) and Monroe County (3.2 percent). The numbers were released Friday by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

Hendry County had the highest unemployment rate (8.7 percent) in Florida in July, followed by Hardee County (6.8 percent) and Highlands County (5.8 percent).

Florida's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 3.7 percent in July 2018, down 0.1 of a percentage point from the June 2018 rate and down 0.4 of a percentage point from a year ago. There were 383,000 jobless Floridians out of a labor force of 10,246,000. The U.S. unemployment rate was 3.9 percent in July.

Individual county rates are not seasonally adjusted.

Among the counties bordering St. Johns, Clay had the lowest unemployment rate at 3.6 percent, followed by Duval (4.1 percent), Flagler (4.3 percent) and Putnam (5.6 percent).

In St. Johns County, the number of employed residents has grown by more than 3,000 in the last 12 months, and the number of jobs is likely to increase. Less than two weeks ago, Walmart announced that it was preparing to hire 350 workers for its new store in the northern part of the county.

Many other commercial projects are set to come online soon, including the massive Durbin Park development near the Duval County line.

In order to encourage more commercial development, the St. Johns County Commission has recently passed measures to reduce impact fees — or at least hold down the increases — for some non-residential projects. And at its last meeting, the Commission voted to exempt commercial development from concurrency obligations.

The idea is to spur growth in job-creating development. Commissioner Jay Morris said he wants the county to target more than just retail growth. The amendment passed by the Commission does not single out such development, but the county does have a program that provides tax rebates to companies that open facilities or expand here with a formula based on job creation and facilities investment.

“We’re at full employment,” Morris said at the meeting. “To me, the concurrency in certain industries isn’t going to stop anybody from coming in. Walmart wants to come in, Walmart’s coming in.”

Morris said he understood that the concurrency amendment does not apply to just certain projects but was hoping this could be one more incentive to help the county better target industries that bring good-paying jobs here.

“Like when Northrop Grumman did their expansion, those jobs were like \$79,000 (per year),” Morris said. “They brought in, I think, 400 new employees.”