



## **Q&A with St. Johns County economic development chief about planned, hopeful projects**

By Derek Gilliam  
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St. Johns County Director of Economic Development Melissa Glasgow has the job of attracting businesses to one of the fastest growing counties in Florida. And it's a job that is becoming more demanding.

She has fielded has many business inquiries this year as she did in all of 2016.

The Jacksonville Business Journal sat down with Glasgow to discuss the projects she's working on and what residents can expect in the future.

*What's been happening in St. Johns County on the economic development front that our readers should be aware of?*

St. Johns County is continuing to grow between 3.5 – 4 percent annually, and has been for the past several years. We added roughly 8,300 people in the past year and our latest estimated population is 235,000. We've also added over 4,500 jobs in the past year according to Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. Our school system remains number one ranked in the state and the county has been ranked number one healthiest county for the sixth year in a row. Our visitor numbers also continue to grow each year so we remain enormously popular. Many people moving here also want to open a business here, too, and that's fantastic. We want to make sure we have the space available to accommodate the commercial interest and keep the positive economic development momentum moving forward.

*What's the status of ongoing projects?*

There's been quite a bit of dirt moving at both Durbin Park Pavilion (9B and Racetrack Road) and Twin Creeks/Beachwalk (CR 210). The Beach Club and Crystal Lagoon are well-underway on that project. There's also other retail projects underway by Ash Properties in the CR 210 corridor. Nocatee retail filling is in and MASHVAC's new manufacturing facility/corporate headquarters is underway at I-95/SR 207. They are relocating from Green Cove Springs to St. Johns County and will employ 30 people. Burkhardt Distributing Company also relocating and is expanding their corporate office/distribution facility next year on a site they purchased on Agricultural Center Drive just west of I-95 near SR 16.

*Projects in the pipeline?*

Flagler Hospital is seeking approval from the county to obtain \$110 million tax-exempt bond financing for hospital expansion projects at their existing location and in the World Golf Village area. Several nice deals are also in the pipeline. Several companies are looking at build-to-suit opportunities. Can't discuss the nature of the projects due to confidentiality. There's also the new owner for the retail buildings at World Golf Village. That should bring new shops and restaurants to that development infusing much-needed (and desired) commercial opportunities. There's also a new office building planned for Ponte Vedra in the popular Veranda development, which should provide some additional Class A office space in a prime area in 2018.

*What are you most excited about?*

I'm excited about the continued level of interest in St. John County on both the residential and commercial front. My office is busier than ever responding to inquiries and proactively promoting the county. So far this year, we've had 137 inquiries, up from 87 this time last year (57% increase). In fact, last fiscal year ending September 30, my office had 137 inquiries total, including several ongoing projects, so we're definitely staying busy. I'm also hopeful that the hard work will pay off and the last half of the year will be filled with some exciting announcements!

*Challenges that you are facing and how do you expect to overcome them?*

What's nice about some of our projects is that they are looking at build-to-suit opportunities. For us right now, we have little industrial and office building inventory available for those seeking existing space. Compressed timeframes and upfront costs typically dictate projects to seek existing buildings when entering a new market, and that could put us at a disadvantage on the front-end of a site search. With space availability declining region-wide (and statewide), some developers may look at initiating speculative development to have some product ready to go. St. Johns County has an economic development incentive program with a unique component geared toward encouraging speculative development for office and industrial projects, which can help reduce some of the costs for the development over time.