



## **USF study: North Florida residents like where they live more than other Florida residents**

By Stuart Korfhage  
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Would you recommend your neighborhood — or at least your community — to newcomers? A study from the University of South Florida says most of us in North Florida probably would.

The study, released in mid-November, asked: “If someone you knew was considering a move, would any of the following keep them from choosing to move to your community?”

Respondents were asked to rate 10 possible deterrents to in-migration. Traffic congestion ranked as the top deterrent while availability of parks and recreation spaces ranked the lowest. For those living in this area and west across the Panhandle, residents mostly rated their hometowns as better places to live than those in other parts of the state.

With rapid growth projected for North Florida, it remains to be seen if that assessment will hold up. But for now, this part of the state is deemed most satisfactory by those who live here.

Susan A. MacManus, project director for the Sunshine State Survey, said she definitely noticed how many positive responses came from North Florida respondents.

“It certainly does speak to the fact that there’s a lot of things going for North Florida right now,” MacManus said. “At the top of the list is not that much traffic congestion. Prices in housing are a little bit lower than other places, pristine environment.”

While more than a third of the approximately 1,200 who took the survey said traffic congestion was a “big problem” in the place where they live, only 18 percent of the North Florida residents polled considered it to be so troublesome.

By comparison, 70 percent of those from Miami/Fort Lauderdale said commute times to work would be a “big” or “somewhat” of a problem. For Tampa Bay residents, the number was 62 percent and for Orlando 56 percent.

That could change for an area where residential growth is very strong, but the people who live here don't all see it that way.

The study said 38 percent of those polled in North Florida anticipate that the quality of life will be better in their own county five years from now. That's significant since so many North Florida residents already are happy about where they live.

That kind of optimism is helping to fuel the continued development in St. Johns County.

One of the more active companies has been Mattamy Homes, which relaunched RiverTown about a year ago. That project along the St. Johns River will eventually have about 4,500 homes. Mattamy is also building some homes in the recently opened Beacon Lake on County Road 210. That development will include up to 1,480 homes at final build out.

Jason Sessions, who is the general manager for RiverTown, said sales in that community are up 30 percent compared to 2016.

Like other popular developments, Sessions said RiverTown is capitalizing on the appeal of the area while also creating a development that has "a small hometown feel minutes from the employment corridor."

"Certainly I think Northwest St. Johns County has a lot of the things that people are looking for," Sessions said. "That's why it's the fastest-growing community in the Jacksonville market."

While housing costs are a concern here as prices have risen sharply in recent years, they are still lower than places like South Florida and even desirable Orlando neighborhoods.

"I think we still have a great value," Sessions said. "Our taxes are still low, comparatively to those other markets."

North Florida also fared well on the issue of public safety. The study showed that 31 percent of North Florida residents said public safety would deter someone from moving there, the lowest rate of any region.

With so many quality of life topics showing favorable results among North Florida residents, it's no wonder so many are looking to move here. Just in St. Johns County, the population has grown by more than 100,000 since 2000. The county had fewer than 85,000 permanent residents as recently as 1990.

"In looking at data from across the state, it seems pretty obvious that the potential for high growth, particularly high residential growth, is big in North Florida," MacManus said.

The study can be found at [sunshinestatesurvey.org](http://sunshinestatesurvey.org).