



St. Johns County rated healthiest in Florida

By Stuart Korfhage
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Already a place of rapid growth, St. Johns County added yet another reason for its appeal with the recent report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In the foundation's 2017 County Health Rankings, St. Johns County was listed as the healthiest county in Florida — based on a variety of factors.

It's nothing new for the county, which has found itself as No. 1 in the rankings for the last six years.

The report considered such things as counties' access to healthy foods, rates of smoking, percentage of population without health insurance, education level and other criteria.

Among the effects of the report is the reinforcement of some of the reasons why the county has become such a magnet for growth in recent years.

Some of that growth stems from geographic, environmental and economic factors — proximity to beach and Jacksonville, availability of undeveloped land, etc. But the results of the report highlight many of the reasons developers and home builders give for the popularity of St. Johns County in their industry.

Jason Sessions, general manager at the master-planned community of RiverTown, said all of the information he gets shows that people buying in that kind of market are looking for an active, healthy lifestyle.

That's why developer Mattamy Homes has invested so much money in hiking/biking trails, kayak launches and parks. Sessions said half of RiverTown is dedicated to green space.

"That allows the No. 1 thing that people are looking for when we talk about health and that's the trail system," Sessions said. "That trail system builds that interconnectivity between the community and builds the sense of community."

Although the schools are a big draw for bringing people in from outside the county, Sessions said the biggest selling point for a community like RiverTown, which faces a lot of competition for buyers in St. Johns County as well as Duval and Clay counties, is the recreation opportunities.

“We do focus groups like crazy, and the No. 1 thing everybody’s always told us in the focus groups, the No. 1 amenity is trails over anything else,” Sessions said.

St. Johns County was first in the sub-category of “social and economic factor.” That includes things like the education level of the population, unemployment and crime, among other factors.

The health rankings also tracked median income but did not consider it in the ranking process. St. Johns County would have fared just as well, though, because it has the state’s highest median household income at an estimated \$71,900.

That’s also a factor in developers’ decisions to build here since so many of those new homes come with sizable price tags. According to the Northeast Florida Association of Realtors, the median sales price of a home in St. Johns County in 2016 was \$295,000. New homes in many communities start around that price point.

A well-educated, affluent population with good schools appeals not just to home builders but other industries as well, said county director of economic development Melissa Glasgow.

She said St. Johns County’s continued billing as the healthiest county in the state is used to encourage companies to consider operating here.

“Quality of life is one of the top factors corporations analyze when selecting area locations, so being ranked Florida’s healthiest county again is a very nice accolade to tout to help capture their attention,” Glasgow said in an email to The Record.

All of the things that make the county attractive to home buyers also attract businesses, she said.

“Great schools, cultural and recreational amenities, and access to quality health care are among those key assets companies seek to ensure their ability to attract and retain educated workers, and ultimately grow successfully within a community,” Glasgow said. “St. Johns County is fortunate to have all of these amenities, which definitely gives us an advantage when we’re in the hunt for corporate headquarters or other business operations that value quality of life.”

Top 5 healthiest counties in state

1. St. Johns
2. Collier
3. Sarasota
4. Seminole
5. Martin

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Source: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation