



St. Johns County seeing expanding labor force, more jobs

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St. Johns County closed 2016 with a lot more people enjoying the fruits of employment.

In a trend that has seen the county's population grow, information released Friday from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity showed there were about 3,300 more employed residents at the end of 2016 compared to the previous year. There was a substantially larger labor pool as well.

The December 2016 employment report showed the county ended the year with a labor force of more than 116,000 after ending 2015 with almost 113,000.

The increasing labor force is consistent with the building boom here, as the county saw more than 3,000 permits for new detached, single-family homes in 2016.

Meanwhile, the county's unemployment rate was nearly the same as last year at the same time. The December 2016 rate was 3.6 percent compared to 3.5 percent in the last month of 2015. December's rate was down 0.2 of percentage point from November.

For the year, St. Johns County never saw its unemployment rate rise to even 4 percent. It was 3.9 percent in January and July. The rate went as low as 3.2 percent in May. That was the county's lowest rate since May 2007 when the rate was 2.9 percent.

The highest reported rate in St. Johns County since the 1990s was 9.3 percent in the first month of 2010.

As for December 2016, St. Johns County's unemployment rate ranked as the third-lowest in the state behind Hamilton (3.4 percent) and Monroe (3 percent) counties.

Overall, Florida's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 4.9 percent in December 2016, unchanged from the November 2016 rate, but down 0.2 of a percentage point from a year ago. Individual county rates are not seasonally adjusted.

There were 491,000 jobless Floridians out of a labor force of 9,947,000 in December. The U.S. unemployment rate was 4.7 percent in December.

Florida gained 251,400 jobs over the year, an increase of 3.1 percent, according to the DEO.

For the counties bordering St. Johns, Clay County had the lowest rate at 4.2 percent, followed by Duval (4.7), Flagler (5.4) and Putnam (5.6).

The Jacksonville Metropolitan Statistical Area, which includes St. Johns County, had an unemployment rate of 4.4 percent in December.

The office of Gov. Rick Scott said in a release that the Jacksonville area added 22,800 new private-sector jobs in 2016. The industries with the most job growth in the Jacksonville area over the year were: leisure and hospitality with 6,800 new jobs; and financial activities, education and health services, each with 3,500 new jobs.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Duval County had the highest average wages in the Jacksonville area at \$933 per week — as of Dec. 29, 2016. St. Johns County was next at \$770 per week.