



Led by Walmart, hundreds of retail jobs coming to county

By Stuart Korfhage
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The county with the lowest unemployment rate in the state is about to add hundreds of new jobs in the coming months due to retail growth.

With several large developments in northern St. Johns County close to opening the commercial components of their projects, many job openings are projected.

The first major opportunity is coming from the Durbin Park development, which is primarily a commercial project with some residential components planned for later.

Among the anchor tenants is Walmart, which is set to open later this year. The retail giant announced Monday that it is beginning the hiring process for about 350 positions at the store.

A temporary hiring center, Panther Plaza, has opened at 10440 U.S. 1 N., Suites 120/121, in St. Johns. Applications will be accepted from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, or applicants can go online to careers.walmart.com.

"We're looking forward to building our team here in St. Johns and sharing the career opportunities available with Walmart," store manager Bobbi Jo Smith said in a release.

The new additions hired in St. Johns will join the total of more than 107,000 Walmart employees in Florida. The company said it plans to spend an estimated \$200 million in Florida over the next year through new store construction, improvements and innovations.

The Durbin Park store will be the second Walmart location in the county.

It certainly won't be alone in the new development. Home Depot will also be part of the first phase of Durbin Park, adding a sizeable number of new hires.

Gatlin Development, which is the developer of the project, has agreements with almost 20 other businesses to lease space at Dubin Park for the first phase. The initial phase of the project, located on an 80-acre parcel west of the new State Road 9B/County Road 2209 interchange, will include approximately 700,000 square feet of retail space.

And that massive project is not the only one percolating up north. Also Monday, Encore Capital Management and Twin Creeks Development Associates, the developer of Beachwalk with the Crystal Lagoon, announced that it has named Colliers International Northeast Florida as exclusive retail leasing brokers for the project.

Homes are already being sold in Beachwalk, as well as in neighboring communities Beacon Lake and Creekside at Twin Creeks. Colliers will be responsible for leasing 450,000 square feet of retail space surrounding the Crystal Lagoon in Beachwalk as part of the first phase of commercial development. The total project will contain up to 1 million square feet of commercial space.

Those are just two of the major commercial developments taking place in the northern region of the county right now, and judging by the most recent employment numbers, it might be a bit of a struggle to fill all of those positions that are coming online.

In June, St. Johns County had an unemployment rate of 3.1 percent, tied with Okaloosa County for the lowest rate in the state, according to statistics from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. In the last 12 months, the county's labor force has increased by about 4,000 workers to around 127,000.

Certainly, workers from the surrounding counties will help fill the open positions, but those counties are also close to full employment. Clay County had an unemployment rate of 3.5 percent in June, followed by Duval (3.9 percent), Flagler (4.3 percent) and Putnam (5.3 percent). The July numbers will be released Aug. 17.