



How economically competitive is St. Johns County?

By Colleen Jones
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When compared with other so-called “second-tier” metro areas like Nashville and Charlotte, the Jacksonville region — which, in part, includes St. Johns County — comes in ahead in some areas of economic competitiveness and behind in others, according to a recent report published by the Tampa Bay Partnership.

Northeast Florida, for example, was somewhere in the middle of the pack for average wage at \$48,685 in 2017; Seattle was highest at \$74,162 and Lakeland-Winter Haven was at the bottom at \$41,060. St. Johns County’s average salary last year was \$43,063, a 6.8 percent increase over 2016.

Area unemployment rates, on the other hand, compares favorably nationally, with St. Johns County at a low of 2.7 percent in December.

The study compared how the Jacksonville Metropolitan Statistical Area stacks up in regional competitiveness against 19 other similarly sized markets. Among the measures considered were innovation, talent, fiscal vitality and quality of life.

Of course, St. Johns is one of just five Florida counties in the Jacksonville MSA, the others being Duval, Clay, Nassau and Baker. And to varying degrees, St. Johns looks different from its geographical neighbors.

Glasgow pointed out, for example, that St. Johns County’s job growth rate for 2017 was over 5 percent, whereas growth for the Jacksonville region as a whole was 3.5 percent. The figures are based on statistics from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

Melissa Glasgow, St. Johns County’s director of economic development, said, “I think we are very competitive from a regional standpoint and the region is very competitive on a national scale as well.”

Glasgow cited the the 2018 Elevate Northeast Florida report which found the area rich in entrepreneurial activity and commercial industry.

The Tampa Bay Partnership study shows a fair amount of millennial migration to the area — adding to the talent pool — but fewer advanced degrees (especially in STEM fields) than comparable markets, which could make recruiting and retaining skilled employees more of a challenge. Average university expenditures in research and development was very low (\$5,141) compared with the investment other institutions made in 2017.

Glasgow did tout the St. Johns County School District as a “very strong asset to attract quality economic development,” pointing to its No. 1 rating in public schools statewide and an average graduation rate of 93.3 percent in 2018.

In terms of industry, the Jacksonville metro was somewhere in the middle with an average new business establishment rate of 12.3 percent — above the U.S. average of 10.2 percent — but below other Florida markets such as South Florida (the highest, at 13.8 percent) and Orlando (13.4 percent).

The percentage of workers in non-agricultural jobs “characterized by high levels of technology research and development” in Jacksonville (14 percent) was much less, however, than cities like Seattle, Denver and Austin.