

Things to Love About Ocala this Valentine's and Always



By Laura Byrnes, APR, CPRC



As communications manager for CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, I keep an eye out for workforce news and trends that impact our region and promote that information as called for and, when appropriate, highlight ways CSCLM can be of service to our community.

Recently, I promoted Forbes magazine's inclusion of the Ocala/Marion County metro area to its list of Top 10 Cities for Future Job Growth. In fact, the Ocala metro made the list for the fourth consecutive year. The ranking is based on Moody's Analytics projected job growth through 2018 for the nation's 200 largest cities. The Ocala metro, which includes all of Marion County, has a population of 344,000 and a projected job growth rate of 3 percent, more than double the national average.

The fact that the area is consistently on the radar for future job growth fits right in with our mission to connect employers with qualified, skilled talent and job seekers with employment and career development opportunities. And as good news tends to beget more good news, I figured the Ocala metro would rank fairly high on Forbes' companion list of Best Cities for Business and Careers – after all, we've landed on that list in the past as well.

This time, however, we end up at No. 140. Wait. What? You're telling me that after being lauded year after year for future job growth, we end up in nearly the lowest quartile for business and careers?

Forbes had us in the middle of the pack at No. 100 for both cost of doing business and job growth, and 186th for education. Something didn't add up.

I looked at some other rankings, including nearby Gainesville which is home to the University of Florida. Our neighbor ranked No. 70 even though it didn't compare nearly as favorably as Ocala on the first two indicators. But it came in at No. 18 for education. The profile touted Gainesville as home to one of the largest universities in the United States and noted it was also home to Santa Fe College, two art festivals, museums, theatres and performing arts centers.

So then I took a closer look at the magazine's full profile for Ocala, and it did not paint a complete picture. Heck, we have art festivals, museums, community theatre and a performing arts center, too,

Let me state at the outset that I understand Forbes is limited in terms of the amount of information it can publish when describing Ocala's attributes. But since Ocala consistently makes the Top 10 List, I'm hoping Forbes might consider including a few more salient/updated details about our community. Honestly, I'm still scratching my head over some of the things they decided to include – i.e. the old Coca-Cola building is the top example of "culture"—and what has been omitted. Toward that end, I respectfully submit the following for the magazine's kind consideration. Or at least yours.

First, in terms of education, Forbes correctly noted that Ocala is home to the College of Central Florida, three-times selected as eligible for the Aspen Prize, and which, also ranked last year as one of Florida's Top

10 Colleges for student engagement, affordability, graduation rate and other factors. There was also mention of a satellite campus of Rasmussen College. True enough. But what's missing is that Ocala is also home to satellite campuses of the University of Central Florida, St. Leo University and Webster University and that it is located just 34 miles from the aforementioned UF. There are several other postsecondary options as well, such as Taylor College and Marion Technical College.

Not every community is serendipitous enough to have a major university situated in their own backyard, but not everyone wants or needs a four-year degree. Ocala offers a wide array of postsecondary opportunities that fit the diverse needs of a variety of students. Plus there are myriad local options for those interested in earning their bachelor's or master's, including BS degrees at CF in nursing, early childhood education and business and organizational management. Not to mention, those who earn Associate's degrees at CF are guaranteed admission to UCF. And if that's not enough, well, it's still an easy commute up the road to Gator Nation.

Forbes also briefly noted that the area's "farms are famous for their thoroughbred horses, in terrain similar to Kentucky bluegrass." What isn't mentioned is that Ocala is the official Horse Capital of the World™, based on the highest concentration of horses per capita. The legendary Needles, of Bonnie Heath Farm in Ocala, became the first Florida-bred Kentucky Derby and Belmont Stakes winner in 1956. Since then, numerous world champions have had ties to Ocala, including the last two Triple Crown winners: American Pharoah trained here and Affirmed was born, bred and trained here. But I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

Ocala/Marion County is also home to national and international equestrian events and competitions, including the 10-week HITS Ocala Winter Circuit (Horses in the Sun), Live Oak International combined driving and show jumping competition, Ocala Breeders Sales and the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders' and Owners' Association which houses a thoroughbred industry museum and publishes The Florida Horse, Wire to Wire and Horse Capital Digest magazines. Additionally, Ocala/Marion County is home to the Florida Horse Park, a 500-acre multipurpose facility and one of Central Florida's premiere venues for equine, agricultural, educational, and sporting events.

Lastly, the significance of the equine industry - along Ocala's love of art and heart for helping others - is evidenced by the herd of horse sculptures created for two Horse Fever public art projects (2001 and 2011). You'll find these throughout the community, in public places and private spaces. At the time, the original Horse Fever was the third most successful public art project in the nation. Combined, both projects raised more than \$1 million for charity.

Forbes pointed out that Ocala is also known for nearby Silver Springs, "site of one of the largest artesian spring formations in the world and Silver Springs Nature Theme Park, one of the earliest tourist attractions in Florida." What isn't mentioned is that Silver Springs is home of the original Glass Bottom Boats and served for decades as Hollywood East

location for popular movies and television shows too numerous to mention. Okay, I'll mention a few: five of the Tarzan movies, three of the Creature from the Black Lagoon films, The Yearling, three James Bond flicks (Thunderball, Moonraker and Never Say Never Again), Rebel Without A Cause, Legend, Doc Hollywood, Sea Hunt and I Spy. But Marion County likewise boasts Rainbow Springs, Rainbow River, Ocklawaha River and more lakes than can be named. Situated next to the Ocala National Forest - the second largest national forest in the state and the Florida Trail which cuts through forest - Ocala is also a mecca for hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, water skiing, camping, swimming, scuba diving, snorkeling and canoeing.

I mentioned that Forbes considered the Coca-Cola building, built in 1939, along with the Union Train Station as «other points of cultural interest.» No doubt Ocalans admire both structures. But when it comes to culture, the magazine missed the mark. What about the burgeoning Silver Springs International Film Festival, held in historic downtown Ocala in the beautifully restored Marion Theatre? Why no consideration of the Ocala Symphony Orchestra or Kingdom of the Sun Concert Band or the the world-class Appleton Museum of Art or Discovery Science Center or Ocala Community Theatre, Circle Square Cultural Center or the Brick City Center for the Arts (home of the Marion Cultural Alliance)? And certainly the Reilly Arts Center merits a mention. The OSO's permanent home, after all, is located in Tusawilla Park in the restored 1936 art deco City Auditorium.

As for that other beacon of culture, the Union Train Station, adjacent to the new Tusawilla Art Park, is in the process of being converted to an artists' incubator (Magnolia Art Xchange).

But wait, there's more! Also not mentioned: Ocala boasts the largest nighttime Christmas Parade in Florida and holds an annual Fine Arts for Ocala juried art festival along with the Symphony Under the Lights holiday concert and Symphony Under the Stars concert and fireworks display, to name just a very few.

Our sport complexes are state of the art and, in fact, Ocala has three-peated as host of various Cal Ripken World Series at the Rotary Sportsplex. Speaking of hosting major sporting events, Ocala's many outstanding golf courses include the Golden Ocala Golf Club which twice hosted the Coates Championship LPGA tournament. The inaugural event in 2015 was the LPGA's first stateside season opener since 2009. It drew 80,000 spectators, pumped more than \$18 million into the local economy and was televised nationally by the Golf Channel and broadcast in a 165 countries. Its inaugural gala was hosted by film stars, and Marion County residents, John Travolta and Kelly Preston.

Did I mention that megastars John Travolta and Kelly Preston live here? Well, they do, just north of Ocala in the exclusive Jumbolair development where the couple parks their Boeing 707 and Gulfstream. To date, Travolta has held premieres in Ocala for five of his films, including for «Wild Hogs,» «Old Dogs,» and «Bolt,» appearing in person on the red carpet along with his wife, and on occasion his daughter, and helping raise funds for local charities.

Other celebrities call Ocala home as well, including iconic country singers, Mel Tillis and Bobby Goldsboro.

But let's talk business. After all, that's what Forbes is all about and the rankings highlight best cities for business and careers. I mentioned

the art incubator. But since 2012, Ocala has also operated the successful Power Plant Business Incubator, so named because it not only powers startup businesses but it also occupies a renovated City of Ocala electric building. Ocala has also leveraged business strength from the successful merger of its chamber and economic development entities, now the Chamber & Economic Partnership (CEP).

Ocala is also ideally situated at the crossroads of major North-South and East-West byways, including I-75. It is also served by CSX Railroad, the Ocala International Airport and what is becoming a bustling Commerce Park, home of the new FedEx Distribution Hub and soon home for AutoZone distribution warehouse and Chewy's, Inc., distribution center. For the last two consecutive months, also ranks No.1 among all Florida's metros for manufacturing job growth rate (+6.5%) and has averaged the third fastest rate overall since January 2015.

I could go on. But I'd be remiss if I didn't at least mention that CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion works with business, economic development, education, community and government partners to connect employers with qualified, skilled talent and job seekers with employment and career development opportunities - at no charge - which one could consider a critical piece in keeping the cost of business down while growing jobs.

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