

WHEN IT COMES TO FINDING THE RIGHT JOB, AREA COMMUTERS HAVE DRIVE



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State Road 200 heading east out of Hernando takes you through some mighty pretty countryside, over the Withlacoochee River, past the Halpata Tasthanaki Preserve, Ross Prairie State Forest, Spruce Creek Preserve Golf and Country Club and Bel Lago.

The roadway widens from two lanes just beyond the intersection at Highway 484 where, if you turn left, you'll end up in Dunnellon and turning right takes you into Marion Oaks. Soon enough, you'll find yourself negotiating traffic that, let's just say, can be heavy at times once a couple Super Walmarts, dozens of major developments and a myriad of other businesses are thrown into the mix.

Making that commute from Citrus County is something I used to do when I lived in Inverness and worked in Ocala. Before that, I lived in Brooksville and drove to Crystal River. My husband commutes from Ocala to Gainesville for his job, and for going on three decades, our CEO has made the daily trek from his home near St. Augustine to Ocala.

The bottom line is that workers who live in one county may be employed in another. There's nothing unusual about that, and there's nothing wrong with it. Knowing where workers live and where workers, work - in short, knowing where a labor market draws its commuting workers - is important for economic developers and for prospective and existing businesses.

That's why we commissioned the latest labor shed analysis for Marion County as well as for Citrus and Levy counties. I should point out that the report, though released this March, is based on data from 2015. Those numbers, from the annual Census, are the latest available and even though the information is three years in the rear-view mirror, what they can tell us is still important.

First, here's what the detailed examination of commuting patterns found for Marion County:

- Nearly half the workers living in Marion County leave the county for employment, with most commuting to Orange, Lake and Alachua counties
- In 2015, there were 107,076 workers living in Marion County and 91,588 workers employed in Marion County.
- Of those workers living in Marion County, 48,888 or 45.7 percent were employed outside the county



- Of those employed in Marion County, 58,188 (63.5 percent) live and work here while 33,400 (36.5 percent) commute into the county for work.
- Net job flow loss was 15,888 workers, the 20th lowest among Florida Counties.

Before you pick up the phone and tell me I've given you two different numbers for the same thing - as one reporter recently insisted - please understand that "workers living in Marion County" is not the same as "workers employed in Marion County." In the opening examples, I was a worker living in Hernando County whose employment was in Citrus

County, and then I was a worker who lived in Citrus County whose employment was in Marion County. Now I am a worker who lives and works in Marion County.

So, when this data snapshot was taken, Marion County had 107,076 working residents but nearly half commuted to a nearby county for work - that's our "outflow." When we talk about the 91,588 workers employed in Marion County, that's comprised of the 58,188 workers who live and work in Marion County plus an additional 33,400 workers who live outside the county but commute here for work - that's our "inflow."

When you have more workers leaving the county for work than coming in, that results in a net job flow loss of 15,488 workers.

Where are they going? According to the analysis, top destinations for Marion County workers employed elsewhere are Orange County (5,665 workers), Lake County (5,536 workers) and Alachua County (4,979 workers). Citrus County ranked sixth (2,107 workers) and Levy County was 17th (672 workers).

Where are those living outside the county coming from to work here? The top origin counties are Citrus County (3,687 workers), Lake County (2,644 workers) and Orange County (2,193 workers).

A couple of key points about all that. First, no matter how you slice and dice the data, our CEO Rusty Skinner said it "reinforces the need to be competitive, in terms of compensation, with similar businesses within a one-hour commute."

Point in fact: more than one third of Marion County's outflowing commuters are employed in neighboring Alachua, Lake, Sumter and Citrus counties, all within a one-hour radius. By the same token, more than one-third of our inflowing commuters also come from adjacent counties of adjacent counties (Citrus, Lake, Alachua, Sumter and Levy counties).

If you run or own a business, that's instructive.

Jordan Steelfox, human resources generalist for Seven Rivers Regional Medical Center in Crystal River, took part in the Marion County Spring Career Fair last month because she said her company is "accustomed to commuters in every department coming from adjoining counties."

"It's about finding that right career path," she told me. "If it's not a couple miles from home, or even across town, you need to look further."

The data, as you can see, tells us that workers do just that.

Lest you think there is a mass exodus of workers from our county - especially among the young - there is good news: since the economy began improving in 2015, the daily outflow of workers under age 55 has actually slowed since the slowing, with slight declines both as a percentage and in total numbers, while there was little change in the number of workers 55 and older commuting for employment.

Among workers leaving the county for jobs, 24 percent (11,750) are 29 or younger, 51.1 percent (24,980) are age 30 to 54, and 24.9 percent (12,158) are 55 or older. That total of 48,888, or 45.7 percent, is down from 49,239 or an outflow of 48 percent from the previous year.

Still, if we're truly interested in keeping more of Marion County's young workers working here in Marion County, then as Rusty said, "one of our goals should focus on working with high school graduates and first-time job seekers to retain their skills within our communities."

This certainly includes working with our school districts and the College of Central Florida to develop short term, certificate and degree programs (both Associate and Bachelor) that focus on the skills sets businesses need. In case you weren't aware of it, CareerSource CLM, Marion County Public Schools and CF all have active intern and work experience programs that help first-time workers transition into the workforce.

Other key findings:

- In terms of average wages, 21,412 (43.8 percent) of those leaving the county earn \$15,012-\$39,996 and 28.9 percent (14,153) earn \$39,997 or more; 43.3 percent of those commuting into Marion County (14,462) earn \$15,012-\$39,996 and 28.4 percent (9,473) earn \$39,997 or more.
- Of those working outside Marion County, 12.9 percent (6,330) are employed in "goods producing" industries such as mining, construction and manufacturing; 28.9 percent (14,112) in "trades, transportation and utilities"; and 58.2 percent (28,446) in "other services" which covers a wide array of services including dry cleaning and laundry, administering religious activities, personal and pet care, equipment and machinery repair and dating services. Among workers commuting into Marion County, 14.3 percent (4,780) are employed in "goods producing" industries; 35 percent (11,698) in "trade, transportation and utilities"; and 50.7 percent (16,922) in "other services."
- Workers employed in Marion County are clustered in the healthcare and social assistance industries (17.6 percent) along with retail trade (16 percent). Workers living in Marion County are concentrated in healthcare and social assistance (17 percent) and retail trade (14.7 percent).

Let me wrap up by going back to that initial caveat about the data which, while it is the latest we have available is still from 2015. While I don't have a crystal ball, I can make an educated projection based on what we have seen and where we are in terms of the recovery. If outflow began slowing in 2015 when Marion County's unemployment rate averaged 6.4 percent and there were 8,363 out of work and a labor force of 129,994, it stands to reason that fewer are leaving the county now that the jobless rate has fallen to 4.6 percent, the number of unemployed has dropped to 6,138 (as of February) and our labor force has expanded to 134,217, adding 6,448 new jobs in the interim.

Of course, we'll have to wait until the 2021 Labor Shed Report is available to see how good a prognosticator I turn out to be. In the meantime, if you want to view the 2018 Labor Shed Reports, visit the Resource Links for Businesses under the Businesses tab at careersourceclm.com.

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