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In the Know: SWFL and state now among spots with top paying jobs in US, report shows

Phil Fernandez - Naples Daily News – January 11, 2022



Jimmy Buffett performs in Orlando in December 2019.

Over the decades, many workers moving to Florida arrived knowing they'd be paid less but have some wonderful benefits that include year-round sunshine, beaches and no state income tax.

Now, though, the Peninsula is becoming more competitive with salaries on at least a few jobs, based on new data out Tuesday morning. Among metros on the rise: Southwest Florida and the Tampa Bay and Port St. Lucie areas.

As part of a large, wide-ranging study, U.S. News & World Report looked at the five metro areas nationally that paid best for each of 200 jobs, using federal labor statistics and other info. Adjacent to each other, both San Francisco and San Jose showed up on almost half of those positions, leading the nation.

Tampa Bay led the state with three jobs in the Top 5 in salary, with the metros of Collier County, Sarasota-Manatee and the Port St. Lucie area having two. Lee County, Jacksonville, Gainesville, Tallahassee, The Villages and the Vero Beach area were among those with one.

"The jobs range from health care to business to engineering, which shows a diversity of strong occupations in the state," said Antonio Barbera, consumer advice senior editor at U.S. News. "With favorable climate and no state income tax as continual draws, it's likely more and more people will look to move to smaller Florida communities, where the cost of living is lower than in bigger cities."



In the Know: Both Collier and Lee counties have jobs that pay among the Top 5 highest in the nation, according to a new study. *Derejeb / Getty Images*

Sales representative, with an annual median of \$91,760, put Cape Coral-Fort Myers on the list. For Naples, it was a pair of very different positions: Esthetician and skincare specialist at \$59,560 and civil engineer, \$118,110.

"It is likely that Florida's strong growing economy and the existing shortage of professional engineers have played a leading role in engineering salaries increasing to attract and retain qualified professionals," said Edie Ousley, spokeswoman for the American Council of Engineering Companies of Florida and the Florida Engineering Society, and a former vice-president for the Florida Chamber of Commerce. "Southwest Florida in particular had more of a shortage of engineers than other parts of the state."

As In the Know addressed last week and previously, the region has been a leader nationally in migration arrivals, and that's meant lots of construction activity and offshoots.

"Florida's economic competitiveness is really strong," Ousley told me. "Nearly 1,000 new residents are moving to Florida everyday, and as we prepare Florida's infrastructure for smart

growth and development, engineers and engineering will play a vital role. Like many professions, Florida has had a shortage of qualified and experienced engineers —and that was happening even prior to COVID."



In the Know: Civil engineers can be paid well in Collier County, if you can find them to fill local jobs, according to industry leaders. *Sturti / Getty Images*

Wages increasing for many jobs

The shortage of engineers is happening with jobs in other industries, too, said Michael Dalby, president and CEO of The Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce:

"Here's what we're hearing from employers: It can be challenging getting experienced talent to take jobs here due to the higher cost of living, primarily driven by the costs of rents and housing," Dalby said. "So while wages have generally increased in many occupations, the costs of living in Collier, and Lee are rising, too. Depending on where the talent is moving from, the tax savings may not offset the increased costs of living."

That definitely is a hurdle, said Tiffany A. Esposito, president and CEO for SWFL Inc., a chamber of commerce that serves Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties.

"While we are seeing a small increase in wages, we are seeing a massive increase in housing costs," Esposito said. "If it is too expensive to live in Southwest Florida, then employees can't afford to live here, causing employers to continue to have talent supply issues. Wages are a small piece of the overall issue for employers finding employees right now."



In the Know: Some folks may be making more money, but the cost of housing is also rising in Southwest Florida. *Getty Images*

The local opportunities certainly exist. As an example, from 2015 to 2020, Collier jobs increased by 6.4%, from 153,543 to 163,307, said Melanie Schmees, the Naples chamber's director of business and economic research.

"Top growth industries by jobs in the same time frame are manufacturing, transportation and warehousing and construction, while top growth occupations are management, legal and architecture and engineering," Schmees said.

It goes beyond Collier, Esposito told me.

"We continue to see growth in all sectors including the service industry and professional services. Gig work and Amazon have become more prevalent than ever before," Esposito said. "We are seeing jobs in Southwest Florida becoming more competitive with the addition of new higher-wage jobs. With inflation and rising minimum wage, higher wages have to be balanced against rising cost."

Corporate relocation specialists, such as The Boyd Company, have been telling me that even more high-paying jobs could be coming to Southwest Florida.

Among them, according to the Boca Raton-based firm's John Boyd Jr.: "Projects in the rapidly-growing clean tech industry, including companies involved with clean energy generation, energy efficient devices, green construction and water and bioremediation technologies. Algenol (in

south Lee County) with its patented algae technologies and energy firm World Electric Supply in Lee County are two clean tech firms making a name."



In the Know: Expect more high-paying jobs to be part of Southwest Florida's future equation, according to business leaders. *TheaDesign, Getty Images/Stockphoto*

Need 'influx of tech or health jobs'

Those are the kinds of jobs that could push a rise in salaries, U.S. News' Barbera told me.

"For Florida cities to catch up to some of the higher-ranking metropolitan areas on the Best Paying Cities rankings, it would likely require a significant influx of technology or health care jobs," he said.

With more employment opportunities on the horizon, the medical world certainly is in play locally.

"Life sciences, led by the medical devices sector, is another industry we expect to increase its presence in the greater Naples area, developing a new cluster around Reinhold Schmieding's Arthrex, a global leader in orthopedics," said Boyd, who tracks global development trends and works with dozens of clients such as Boeing, Dell, Samsung and UPS. And that ties to "reshoring the production (of) vital medical products."

"The pandemic has uncovered how fragile and risky our global supply chain is, especially when it comes to delivering needed pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, which are mostly sourced in China and other far-off countries," he said. "Southwest Florida is well-positioned to benefit from this reshoring trend, especially given Florida's positive state business climate, right-to-work legislation, low taxes and lifestyle amenities."



In the Know: The beach continues to draw future workers to Southwest Florida, leaders say. *Courtesy Of Getty Images*

Some Sunshine State metros had a few health-related positions in the Top 5 nationally, such as dentist (\$278,790) and optometrist (\$170,840) in Sarasota-Bradenton, anesthesiologist (\$303,600) in Tallahassee, psychologist (\$125,230) in Jacksonville, occupational therapist (\$115,920) in The Villages and message therapist (\$81,640) in the Port St. Lucie area.

"The increase in remote working opportunities may accelerate people's movements," Barbera said. "Those working in bigger cities may be able to relocate to smaller communities such as Naples or Port St. Lucie and work remotely full time at their existing company."

With 15 overall jobs on the list, Florida has been gaining ground, but it falls short, behind even a boatload of cities. It would rank 15th behind those communities if the state was just one giant metro of 22 million residents. It's "worth noting that many of the Best Paying Cities are located in areas with a high cost of living, so job seekers and movers should consider this trade-off when seeking out a new place to live and work," Barbera said.

And that, coupled with no state income tax, is where Florida will continue to have an advantage, even if overall wages are not as high as the West Coast or Northeast.

"No state income tax has been and will always be one of the many attractive reasons to move to Florida," said SWFL Inc.'s Esposito. "Our strong tourism market allows us to continue to be one of the few states with no income tax, and we should preserve and protect that."