

Fort Pierce, St. Lucie attracting traditional blue-collar jobs

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FORT PIERCE — St. Lucie County and Fort Pierce officials are attracting blue-collar jobs to the north county area.

In the past year, the county and the city have attracted 282 manufacturing-related jobs, with another 300 jobs expected to come in the next three years, according to county and Fort Pierce records.

These jobs — semi-skilled manual-labor positions that require little training and no extensive education — are bringing starting wages of \$12-\$16 an hour and full benefits.

The unemployment rate has yet to show the impact of the job-recruitment efforts, as the county unemployment rate of 5.3 percent is slightly higher than the state's average of 5 percent.

More companies that provide blue-collar jobs are expected to move to the north county area because the prices for large parcels of commercial land are cheaper here than in South Florida, said Brian Kaatz, owner of Tropical Recycling, which processes recycling from Vero Beach.

Before opening the Fort Pierce location, Kaatz's trucks traveled 81 miles five times a day from West Palm Beach to pick up recyclables in Vero Beach and take them to West Palm Beach for sorting.

"This is a great location because I'm able to process the materials from Vero Beach without spending a lot of money on fuel for trucks to haul the material," Kaatz said. "I can take the money I would be spending on fuel and invest that into new equipment or hire more employees."

Key to the attraction of more blue-collar jobs to St. Lucie and Fort Pierce are the efforts of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County, the agency responsible for job creation.

The council has changed its strategy, focusing on attracting manufacturing jobs and retaining existing businesses instead of recruiting biotechnology companies.

In the early 2000s, the council worked with the city of Port St. Lucie and Enterprise Florida, the state's economic-development arm, to lure biotech companies here. The promise of biotech, however, never materialized.

“It was a good effort to try something new, but unfortunately we didn’t have the workforce to sustain those jobs,” said Pete Tesch, president of the Economic Development Council.

The council hired a consultant to review the county's strengths and weaknesses, and the report showed the county would be suited for manufacturing-and-distribution jobs because of its network of roads — Interstate 95, Florida’s Turnpike and U.S. 1 — would make it easier for businesses to transport goods.

The effort to bring jobs to the northwest area of the county was launched by County Administrator Howard Tipton when he was hired three years ago.

The county has hired a business navigator to guide business owners through the permitting process. The county's economic-development policy offers property-tax breaks to businesses that create at least 25 manufacturing or distribution jobs in blighted areas. The tax break is granted for up to 10 years and is tied to the number of jobs created and the hourly wage.

"The economic boom that hit south county, mostly skipped the north area," Tipton said. "I would like that to change and for the entire county to prosper. For that to happen, we would need to focus on the areas that are not doing as well as other parts of the county."

In Fort Pierce, the city last year created a five-member economic-development team, whose job is to recruit businesses and retain existing ones.

It was the network of roads that helped Fort Pierce lure Indian River Bio-Diesel from Indiantown. Owner Richard Pratt said he toured industrial areas in Jacksonville, Savannah, Georgia, and New Jersey before finding what he needed right here: a large building in an industrial area with access to major roads.

"You can't find something like this in South Florida," Pratt said.

Pratt’s company converted the former Egan citrus packinghouse on North Second Street in the Port of Fort Pierce into a plant that daily processes 250,000 gallons of used vegetable cooking oil into methyl ester, an additive used to make biodiesel, and glycerin, which is used by cosmetics companies to make soap, shampoos and makeup. He has hired 38 full-time employees, starting them at \$16 an hour.

Among new businesses to the area are:

[Rocla Concrete](#), 600 S. Third St., a manufacturer of railroad cross ties. It created about 40 jobs with average annual salary of \$44,000.

[Tropical Recycling](#), 1405 Bell Ave, which in 2015 expanded from West Palm Beach to the former Tree Sweet citrus plant. It created 22 jobs and plans to hire about 10 people a year, up to 50. The average annual salary is about \$37,000.

[Islamorada Beer Company](#), 3200 St. Lucie Blvd., which opened in October 2016 near Treasure Coast International Airport & Business Park. It added 25 jobs, with employees earning an average of \$37,000 a year.

[Sailfish Brewery](#), 130 N. Second St., which opened in February in downtown Fort Pierce, adding 10 jobs that pay an average of \$37,000 a year.

Future companies include:

Pompano-beach based [Precast Concrete Specialists](#), a concrete manufacturing company, which has zoning approval to build a 76,100-square-foot plant on 75 acres of a former citrus grove at 3798 Selvitz Road, west of Fort Pierce Central High School. It would add 300 jobs. The average annual wage would be \$41,250.

[Radical Cosmetics](#), a New Jersey-based make-up manufacturer and distributor, which has purchased the former Fort Pierce Police Athletic League building, 1401 N. Second St., to operate a cosmetics-manufacturing plant. The company plans to hire about 50 employees and pay an average of \$37,500 a year.

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