Florida’s New Business Frontier

Suwannee County

Located in the North Florida and Suwannee River Valley region, Suwannee County is bordered by the namesake of the Florida state song on three sides. But you don’t have to go down to the river to see that the future is bright for one of the Sunshine State’s hidden treasures.

The people who live and work in Suwannee County will tell you a story of a region with a unique combination of natural resources, economic opportunities and a quality of life that is both attracting big companies and providing an enviable lifestyle for local residents. The truth is that while Florida has lots of attractive locations to advance a career and raise a family, there are certain advantages to doing business in this part of the state that simply can’t be replicated in other locations.

If you need efficient transportation in and out of the area or need to move products across the country or around the world, Suwannee County offers close access to multiple interchanges, providing proximity to major metropolitan areas in every direction. Add a freight rail system, a deepwater port an hour away and plenty of developed infrastructure and affordable land, and it is no wonder this area continues to thrive.

If you want the peace and tranquility of the rural lifestyle but want to stay within a short drive to the shopping, dining, college football and art museums of some of Florida’s (and south Georgia’s) most exciting cities, Suwannee County offers that, too.

But you don’t have to go anywhere to experience some of the best reasons to work and live in Suwannee County, according to Alvin Jackson, director of the Suwannee County Economic Development Office. He says that the quality of life offered in this region is special, with a warm, welcoming community that appreciates its natural resources, the arts and activities that make attracting new businesses easy.

“Suwannee County is open for business.”
—Dr. Alvin B. Jackson, Jr., Director, Suwannee County Economic Development Office
A Business-Minded Community

Make no mistake, Jackson says. “Suwannee County is open for business. We have an attitude that asks, ‘How we can make it happen?’ Our leadership has made it very clear that we want to create jobs and expand our tax base by helping industry get through the processes so they can move in and get to work as quickly as possible.”

Suwannee County is home to one of Florida’s most diverse agribusiness communities that includes poultry production and sales; crop production and distribution; and light manufacturing. Currently under construction is one of the world’s largest sawmills. Service-based companies also have a home in Suwannee County with companies in retirement and medical services as well as varied professional, financial and entertainment-based enterprises.

In 2007, the county’s 500-acre industrial park was named as a Catalyst Site, one of four regional sites to be developed with the help of the state of Florida as a strategy for economic development in Florida’s Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern. The Rural Economic Development Catalyst Project, led by Enterprise Florida in partnership with numerous state, regional and local organizations, is targeting industries such as logistics and distribution; building component design and manufacturing; biofuels and renewable energy. The Catalyst Site is eligible for increased state incentives along with other benefits and is also an Enterprise Zone and eligible for those additional incentives.

The first resident of the Catalyst Site is Klausner Lumber One, a high-tech facility that will create 350 permanent jobs and inject $130 million in capital over three years.

The draw to the area, according to Thomas Mende, president of international business development for Klausner, was the combination of forest resources, location to markets, access to ports, rail access and tax incentives.

“In the end, the state of Florida through Enterprise Florida, the North Florida Regional Development Partnership and the various government agencies have been extremely helpful in all kinds of aspects of the project,” Mende says. “It was their commitment that made the difference over other states we were considering.”

Klausner is happy to be the anchor tenant.

What Leaders Are Saying about Suwannee County

“From one who has experienced growth and development in a large setting, I recognize that Suwannee County is a diamond in the rough. There is so much opportunity here to shape our future by properly planning our land uses and development while simultaneously preserving our natural resources and quality of life.”

Randy Harris
Suwannee County Administrator
of Florida’s first Catalyst Site. "We look most forward to other companies recognizing the great potential of Suwannee County as a business and industrial location," he says. "We will do our part to recruit complementary companies to our field, but the exciting part about the Catalyst Site is the development of an industrial area serving a variety of companies."

With hundreds of jobs being created, Mende appreciates that his plant had to be located in a place both he and his employees would enjoy living. He says he has found that in Suwannee County, "The more time I spend in the county the more I love it," he says. "The area is incredibly special and beautiful and has so many hidden gems."

A key factor that allowed Klausner to consider Suwannee County was the agreement to have freight rail available at the Catalyst Site. It was a requirement that one of the nation’s largest transportation suppliers was happy to accommodate. "We are pleased to be part of what is happening in Suwannee County," says Stephanie Lane, director of industrial development for CSX. "Rail is a great amenity and usually necessary for industrial players who are interested in a park like this."

Adding rail service to the park, which already has key amenities such as water, electric and wastewater treatment, makes things faster and ready for additional users coming to the site, Lane says. "In a general sense, a rail user tends to be a larger company that comes in with a much bigger capital expenditure and plans on being around for 20 to 30 years creating long-term jobs," she says. "That is what is going to happen now in Suwannee County with rail being available. We applaud the state and Suwannee County for taking a part in making this happen. They had a big role in getting rail onto that site."

**Strong Local Support**

Helping to supply workers for Klausner and other area companies such as Pilgrim’s Corporation, the world’s second-largest poultry producer, and Precision Turning Corporation, maker of CNC Swiss Screw Machines, is Sheryl Rehberg, executive director of CareerSource North Florida. "We have an educated, willing, trainable and flexible population," Rehberg says. "We work to identify what the companies need, and through outreach and identification of job seekers, help them locate the talent to fill their jobs."

"Businesses like Suwannee County because of our great location with low land cost and natural resources for hobbies," he says. "The ability to live, work and play without having to deal with big city crime and high cost of living is a huge plus."

Suwannee County draws more than 600,000 visitors to the region annually, many of those to the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park & Campground, according to park president and CEO James Cornett. "Tourism helps to diversify our economic base, and we work hard to make sure visitors have a great experience so they will want to return."

The music park is a one-of-a-kind, world-class venue that has hosted artists from all musical genres – The Allman Brothers, Tim McGraw, Jason Aldean, String Cheese Incident, Widespread Panic and many others. "We’ve been investing in infrastructure, training staff and working with officials to prepare a turnkey operation for promoters seeking to produce shows at our facility," he says. "The park includes three outdoor and two indoor stages, hundreds of water and electric campsites, six bathhouses, general store,
A Welcome Change

The county seat and largest city in Suwannee County is Live Oak, a “diamond in the rough” with plenty of forward-thinking business owners, available workforce and opportunity, according to Keith Mixon, city councilman, chairman of the Community Redevelopment Agency and a broker with Live Oak Realty.

“Live Oak is very aggressive and open to growth,” Mixon says. “We are not afraid of change and are really pressing hard for economic development. Anything you are looking for from shopping to entertainment, we’ve got it. It is a community that is looking optimistically at the future.”

One of the primary reasons for the optimism is what Mixon describes as a totally resurrected downtown. “In the past two years we have completely transformed the city of Live Oak,” he says. “We are trying to think outside the box and create a new atmosphere to create economic development that we haven’t had in the past. Employers who come into a community take a risk, so we all realize that we have to work with each other. We have to grow our base, and we have the adequate land and space to do it.”

Nestled against the Suwannee River in the southwest corner of the county is the town of Branford, known as a premier ecotourism destination for activities on and around the river and many nearby springs.

“We have all the rivers and springs where you can go fishing, canoeing, kayaking, cave diving, or go bicycling on the Green Way Trail,” says Ken Saunders, president of the Branford Town Council. “It’s very different than going to other parts of Central Florida.”

What does Jackson see for the future? “I still see the small-town feel, which is what I think the CEOs and their families will be attracted to. We will continue to attract companies along our interchange system and create sustainable jobs, not only for Suwannee County but for the entire region.”

For more information about how you can be part of Florida’s new business frontier, contact:

Suwannee County Economic Development Office
386-364-1700 • floridasnewfrontier.com

Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce
386-362-3071 • suwanneechamber.com

These organizations and businesses contributed to this report and support Suwannee County’s economic development.

- Advent Christian Village
- Little River Springs
- Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park
- Advent Christian Village
- Poole Realty
- First Federal Saving Bank
- Windstream
- Florida Power & Light
- Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park & Campground
- Klausner Lumber One
- Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce
- Palm Bay Manufacturing
- Florida Power & Light
- Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park & Campground

“I feel so blessed to call Suwannee home. Our strong, faith-based community is a laid-back, friendly place to live and work. Our county has a strong partnership with the local and state governments to boost economic development.”

Ronnie Poole
Broker, Poole Realty