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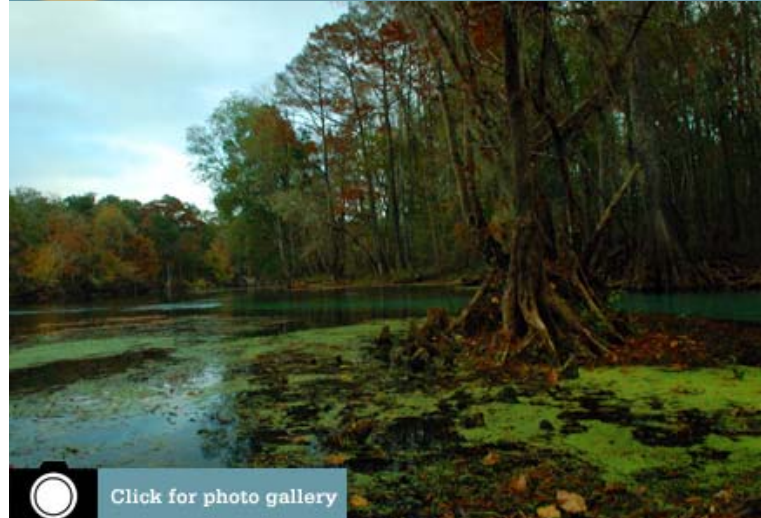
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The Top Ten:
The best of the best!

Regional Top 100:
Southeast
Northeast
Midwest
Southwest
West

Other Top Tens:
See the top ten counties in each of our statistical categories

How We Did It:
How we compiled our list

Story By Dan Miller
Photos By Anna Mazurek

It isn't hard to pin Mark Langford down on his opinion of the quickening pace of residential development spreading across Gilchrist County, Florida.

He would not vote for it, if he could.

Because of the high value of those five- and 10-acre lots carved out of many of his county's 400 farms, his property taxes have risen \$3,000 a year.

Buying new land? Langford's dad bought land for \$1,000 an acre in the early 1980s. That same land now goes for \$10,000, \$15,000, in some instances \$20,000 an acre.

"If it's not handed down to you, you don't have a chance," he says.

Langford's farm is 600 acres. It supports 150 cows, yields a good amount of irrigated hay and grows 40 acres of watermelons.

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Gilchrist County:

- **480 acres** of pastures and trees with home; \$8,640,000 or \$18,000 per acre
- **400 acres** with pastures, ponds and buildings; \$7,200,000 or \$18,000 per acre
- **80 acres** of pasture and trees; \$800,000 or \$10,000 per acre





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Time may not be on the farm's side. It is bordered on three sides by commercial timber. "Development there is only a matter of time," Langford figures.

Gilchrist County is facing the same changes long affecting farmland all over Florida. It is said that 1,000 people a day move into the state. More than 10 million people have moved into the Sunshine State during the last 25 years.

That influx has put a premium on farmland. Florida has farm protection programs, one written by the legislature back in 1959. The state's modern day preservation efforts include a system of favorable property tax assessments (based on production value), a Right-to-Farm law and programs giving landowners the opportunity to sell or transfer development rights. Still, Florida has lost 8 million acres of farmland over the past 50 years.

Laying halfway between Atlanta and Miami, Gilchrist County is feeling people pressure, too. It is a county with high quality farmland and low development pressure centered around three, small towns. Farming there covers 81,000 acres. The median farm size—half the farms are bigger, half are smaller—is 80 acres. The largest category of farms fall in the 10- to 49-acre range. About half the operations in this county produce less than \$2,500 a year in farm income.

E X T R A: Want to know more? Or do you have some information to share? View and post comments about this county.

Demand for these small acreages is not hard to find. Hard on the eastern border of Gilchrist County is Gainesville. The **University of Florida** and **Shands Hospital** are the biggest employers in that community of 123,000. With the vast majority of the Gilchrist County unincorporated, Gilchrist County is tempting frontier for those with well-paying jobs.

Moving out there, they are. Gilchrist is home to 17,000. That's up 17% in only six years.

These new residents are attracted to Gilchrist by its natural amenities, not to mention its open lands. Within its borders are two-square miles of water. The Suwannee River is the best known stretch of body of water. Along its length are found half of Florida's clean water springs that attract swimmers and cave divers from all around the world.



The Sante Fe River—a second water resource cutting into Gilchrist County—boasts prime bass and catfish fishing.

Underlying the quality rural life in Gilchrist are the county's access to medical care and good schools.

In nearby Gainesville are two of the nation's most prestigious medical complexes—the **University of Florida's Shands Hospital** and the acclaimed **North Florida Regional Medical Center**.

Gilchrist County schools, with 2,200 students, have improved in recent years despite large numbers students on the free and reduced lunch program. Florida gives Gilchrist schools a grade of "A." That means most of the district's students are meeting set education standards in reading, math, writing and science.

While Gilchrist County isn't turning away development, it is attempting to protect its rural areas.

The center of the county is home to the Waccasassa Flats. These are environmentally prized farming areas, including about a third of the county in total. There and along the flanks of the flats the county requires residents to own between 40 and 160 acres for every homesite. Across the rest of the county, rural residences must be surrounded by at least five acres of land.

But zoning rules do little to reduce the pressure to sell off pieces of farmland.

John Thomas runs a 2,000-acre operation. This four-generation farm was first homesteaded in the early 1900s. In this neighborhood it is not hard to find the expensive mini-farms found all over the county.

Less than a mile away, a 118-acre farm sold for \$1.25 million (\$10,500 an acre). The



kind value makes many Gilchrist farmers paper millionaires, even if they don't sell.

"You can't justify that price [if you were looking to buy]," Thomas says. "You would never pay that off."

Thomas Farms does include a piece of highly desirable, highly valuable ground. The land borders a scenic, half-mile of the Suwannee River. Draining out of Georgia, the river's hardwood hammocks support turkey and deer. But the land could also support a handful of high-end river homes. Doesn't matter to Thomas. He won't sell.

In the late 1800s, William Roberts' family carved a farm out of ground that would later be part of Gilchrist County. Today, it supports cows and slash pines. Roberts sells a 1,000 round bales of hay a year off his land.

"This is a good place to live," he says. Okay, but would he sell any of his land? "I would when the price gets so high I can't stand it anymore."

It's a day of decision he truthfully doesn't want to see. Roberts is quiet for a time, looking out over a field that last year grew watermelons, then sorghum and now is planted to pines. Then, he adds, "But I wish we could farm like we used to. Oh Lord, I wish we could. But times do change."

More info on the web:

Cooperative Extension, Gilchrist County
gilchrist.ifas.ufl.edu/about_us.shtml

Gilchrist County School District
www.gilchristschools.org

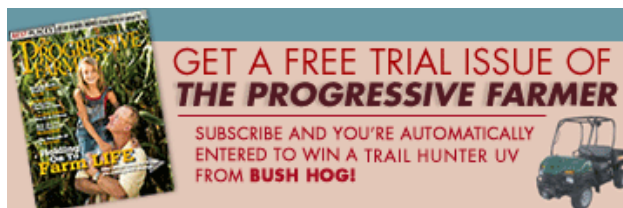
Chamber of Commerce
www.gilchristcounty.com/mainpage.shtml



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Statistic Sheet



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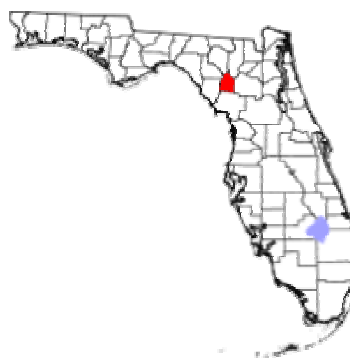


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square mile

46.87 per



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ECONOMICS

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME	43,610	51,093
AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SPENDING	39,997	44,224
COUNTY SALES TAX	7%	6.05%
AVERAGE HOME PRICE	113,676	186,491
JOB GROWTH	2831	2378
UNEMPLOYMENT	219	1343
POVERTY PERCENTAGE	14.2%	12.2%

EDUCATION

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	15.18	15.31
COLLEGE BOUND PERCENTAGE	70%	58.51%
COLLEGE EDUCATION PERCENTAGE	18%	27.64%

CRIME

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
PERSONAL CRIME	49	46
PROPERTY CRIME	40	59



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TOTAL CRIME 41 56

HEALTH CARE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
HEALTH DENSITY	1.08	2.52
NUMBER OF HOSPITALS	0	3
NUMBER OF CLINICS	2	10
NUMBER OF PHARMACIES	3	10

CLIMATE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
AIR QUALITY INDEX	77	95
ANNUAL RAINFALL (INCHES)	56.9	38.85
MINIMUM JANUARY TEMPERATURE (AVG.)	49.89	19.84
MAXIMUM JULY TEMPERATURE (AVG.)	90.78	86.68

CULTURE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 500 AVG.
LEISURE INDEX	1.32	2.94

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