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Monroe wealthiest county in midstate

State's new tier ranking list released

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Monroe County is now the wealthiest county in Middle Georgia, according to the state's new tier ranking list.

Hancock County kept its status as the poorest county in the state, ranking No. 1 on the list.

Monroe County's ranking at No. 135 out of Georgia's 159 counties was unchanged from the past year, but it became tops in Middle Georgia because Houston County dropped from 140 to 132.

The rankings, compiled by the Department of Community Affairs, are based on unemployment rates, per capita income and the percentage of residents below poverty level.

Divided into four tiers, the rankings are used with the job tax-credit program. Employers are allowed certain tax credits for jobs created in each county, with Tier 1 counties allowed the highest tax credits.

Two Middle Georgia counties, Bleckley and Upson, changed tiers in the new list. Both moved from Tier 2 to Tier 1.

Monroe County Commission Chairman Harold Carlisle credited his county's high ranking to the local education system, which he said continuously draws people into the county.

"In my opinion we have a top-notch education system," Carlisle said. "The people are getting educated and getting better jobs. We are getting immigrants from other counties."

With the Department of Corrections moving its headquarters to the old Tift College campus in Forsyth, bringing 400 jobs with it, Carlisle sees Monroe County moving even further to the wealthier end of the state ranking. He suggested Monroe could possibly become Middle Georgia's first Tier 4 county.

Because the list has a fixed number of counties in each tier - including 71 Tier 1 counties - moving to a higher or lower tier does not necessarily mean the counties have changed economically. It more accurately reflects how the counties are doing in relation to other counties.

Out of 28 area counties on the list, 18 are listed in Tier 1. Only four - Putnam, Houston, Jasper and Monroe - are listed in Tier 3, and Middle Georgia has no counties in Tier 4, the richest tier.

In Tier 1 counties, employers creating at least five jobs would be eligible for a tax credit of \$3,500 per job. In Tier 2 counties, employers creating at least 10 jobs would get a \$2,500 tax credit per job. In Tier 3 counties, a tax credit of \$1,500 per job is available when at least 15 jobs are created. And in Tier 4 at least 25 jobs must be created to receive a credit of at least \$750 per job.

The wealthiest county in Georgia, according to the list, is Forsyth County, taking the coveted designation held last year by Fayette County. Both embrace the outer suburbs of metro Atlanta.

While landing in a higher tier might reduce the incentives a county has to lure new jobs, Monroe's county commission chairman said that does not bother him.

Carlisle compared it to owning stock, noting that if a stock price goes up, the holder has to pay more taxes, but no one would regret seeing their stock increase in value because of that.

"You'd rather have your stock becoming more valuable," he said.

TIER RANKINGS

Here's how Middle Georgia counties fared in the state's tier rankings for 2007, with a comparison to the 2006 ranking. The poorest counties rank highest on the list.

Tier 1

1. Hancock (unchanged)
2. Macon (unchanged)
6. Wheeler (unchanged)
7. Treutlen (unchanged)
8. Taylor (+1) *
14. Telfair (unchanged)
19. Jeff Davis (unchanged)
22. Dooly (+1)
23. Emanuel (+3)
24. Washington (+6)
26. Johnson (-6)
44. Peach (+2)
50. Twiggs (unchanged)
56. Wilkinson (+3)
60. Montgomery (-13)
66. Dodge (+2)
68. Bleckley (+11)
71. Upson (+5)

Tier 2

85. Laurens (-2)
90. Bibb (+4)
92. Baldwin (+3)
94. Crawford (-3)
99. Pulaski (+1)
102. Lamar (-3)

Tier 3

112. Jasper (+1)
115. Putnam (+1)
132. Houston(+8)
135. Monroe (unchanged)

* (+1) means the county moved up one position from the 2006 ranking. Moving up in the ranking reflects that the county has gotten poorer in relation to other counties while moving down means the county's economic conditions have gotten better in relation to others.

SOURCE: Georgia Department of Community Affairs

JOB TAX CREDIT TIERS 2007

Each year, the state releases its Job Tax Credit Tier listing to show how each county ranks economically. The rankings are grouped into four tiers, with Tier 1 being the poorest group. The map shows the tier group of each county. Counties in Middle Georgia are named, with a comparison to the 2006 ranking. Moving up in the ranking (+1) reflects that the county has gotten poorer in relation to other counties while moving down means the county's economic conditions have gotten better in relation to others.