

Charlotte best place to live in South ... again

By JOHN HACKWORTH
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Charlotte County is once again the best place to live in America that doesn't have snow.

The long-awaited, much-ballyhooed annual rankings by [Money](#) magazine of America's top 300 places to live listed the Punta Gorda Metropolitan Statistical Area, which includes all of Charlotte County, as fourth best Wednesday.

The area ranked behind only No. 1 Nashua, N.H.; Rochester, Minn.; and Monmouth and Ocean counties, N.J. For the second year in a row, Charlotte County was the No. 1 place to live in the South.

"We'll flaunt this for all it's worth," said Bob Carpenter, executive director of the Punta Gorda Business Alliance. Carpenter and about 100 members of the PGBA gathered for the monthly meeting at 7 a.m. Wednesday and kept their eyes glued to the television, where the announcement was to be made on the "Good Morning America" show. The news was unofficially already out, however, that Charlotte County would be ranked No. 4.

Jeanhee Kim, staff reporter for Money magazine who visited Charlotte County, said the No. 4 ranking is something to be proud of.

"We ranked 300 cities, so there's not much difference between No. 1 and No. 4," Kim said. "The New Jersey cities that moved up and Nashua benefited from four-year universities in their vicinity. And New Jersey is so close to New York with its symphonies and opera houses."

Kim said she visited Jacksonville and Fort Walton Beach -- two other Florida cities in the top 10 -- along with the New Jersey cities listed.

"Of all of them, Charlotte County was my favorite," she said. "There are a lot of things we can't find statistics on -- the intangibles that each person might rank high, like a sense of place or the small-town feel."

Bill Bates, president of the local Economic Development Council, said his group has a brochure about opportunities in Charlotte County on hold at a printing company, waiting for Wednesday's announcement. He said the No. 4 ranking -- lower than the No. 1 spot many had anticipated -- is not bad news.

"Two years in a row we're in the top five and we didn't move down much like some other cities that were in the top 10 last year," Bates said. "We must be doing something right."

According to the Money magazine article, Charlotte County is doing a lot of things right. The magazine polled 503 of its readers on what criteria is important when selecting a place to live.

The readers listed low crime, clean air and water, plentiful doctors and hospitals and good schools among their chief concerns. They also were looking for low property taxes, inexpensive living, job growth and low unemployment.

Last among their concerns were availability of pro sports teams, amusement parks and snow skiing.

The magazine takes that criteria and rates towns according to information gleaned from places like the FBI Uniform Crime Report; national cost-of-living data and job growth stats supplied by Arizona State University.

Nashua grabbed the No. 1 spot mostly because of its 2.3-percent unemployment rate; the fact it has no sales tax and no state or local income tax; its crime rate is 84 percent under the national average and because it is close to top quality health care, universities and entertainment in nearby Boston, Mass.

Charlotte County ranked highest for its job growth, inexpensive living, sunshine, a crime rate 60 percent below the national average and affordable housing. Money predicted Charlotte County will lead the nation with a 13.8-percent job growth rate in the next three years.

The average price for a four-bedroom house was \$135,000 in Charlotte County and \$125,000 in Nashua. Property taxes are higher in Nashua -- \$3,700 compared to \$2,019 in Charlotte County for an average four-bedroom house. Charlotte County, however has a 7-percent sales tax compared to no sales tax in Nashua.

If you like to tan, or enjoy the outdoors, Charlotte County comes out on top with 264 sunny days a year compared to 197 in Nashua.

But Nashua's crime rate is better. There are 106 violent crimes per 100,000 people in that New England town, compared to 275 in Charlotte County. Charlotte was way below national averages with 2,927 property crimes per year, per 100,000 people compared to the nation's rate of 4,832. And violent crime is also much lower in Charlotte County, which reported 275 per 100,000 people compared to 614 in the average city or area.

Charlotte County's most recent honor was well received by others who could piggyback the award to success.

"Hopefully, it will help us tremendously," said Charlene Carroll, director of the DeSoto County Chamber of Commerce.

Nine of the top 21 places to live are in Florida, according to the magazine. Other Florida cities that ranked high include: No. 9 Jacksonville; No. 10 Fort Walton Beach; No. 12 Gainesville; No. 14 Lakeland; No. 15 Fort Lauderdale; No. 17 West Palm Beach; No. 18 Orlando; Sarasota/Bradenton at No. 21; and Fort Myers at No. 35.

Kim said Money magazine offers a service on its Internet site www.moneymag.com where people can enter their own personal preferences for a place to live and search for their ideal location.