

Brevard rocketing to recovery: Space Coast is one of fastest-growing economies in U.S.

June 12, 2025 | Dave Berman, Rick Neale, and Jim Waymer



Robin Fisher recalls the gloomy times Brevard County went through in 2010, as the space shuttle program was a year away from ending — a time when the county’s nickname of “The Space Coast” was not necessarily a positive thing.

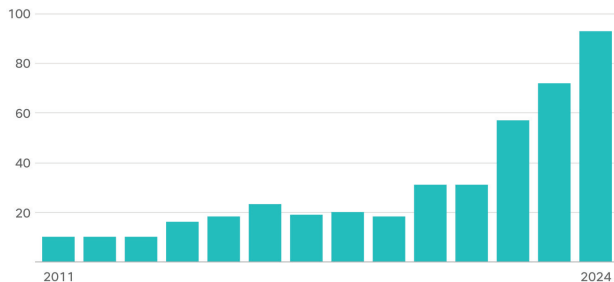
Fisher then was a Brevard County commissioner, representing a North Brevard district that includes Titusville — once known as “Space City USA” and “Miracle City,” in nods to the space program that grew over decades at nearby Cape Canaveral. He helped organize a “Save Space” community rally that featured a lineup of elected officials, former astronauts and other local leaders aimed at getting the community mobilized for economic tumult amid the loss of 8,000 Kennedy Space Center jobs.

The attitude at the time, Fisher recalled, is that “nobody was coming from Washington to save us. We’ve got to save ourselves.”

As it turned out, what came in the ensuing years was not as bad as some had feared — at least in the longer term.

The end of the space shuttle program after the final flight of Atlantis in July 2011 did trigger extensive layoffs. But, in the ensuing years, commercial space companies like SpaceX and Blue Origin helped fill the vacuum. Largely thanks to SpaceX, Brevard County had a record 93 launches in 2024 — and the Space Force projects this year’s total may reach 107 launches.

Launches from the Space Coast, by year



SOURCE Space Florida; GRAPHIC Stephen J. Beard/USA TODAY

Looking ahead, SpaceX seeks Federal Aviation Administration approval to boost annual Falcon rocket launches to 120 launches a year. And the company is bringing the mighty Starship to the Space Coast, generating at least \$1.8 billion in estimated capital investment and 600 new full-time jobs by 2030.

Additionally, aerospace and defense companies expanded, as did the health care sector and tourism, with Port Canaveral cementing its place as the world’s second-busiest cruise port.

“The economy is quite more diverse” now, said Fisher, who owns a State Farm insurance agency and is an investor in small office buildings in Titusville. “No doubt about it. We’ve put ourselves in a good position.”

Brevard — one of fastest-growing economies

So much so that a new national study puts Brevard County’s economy as one of the fastest-growing in the country for midsized communities, and Brevard is projected to continue to have a high ranking in the future.

The recently released study by the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina and Fifth Third Bank found that Brevard had the highest growth rate among 100 midsized communities during the past five years, as measured by gross domestic product, as well as the second-highest growth rate over the last 10 years. For the coming year, the study ranks Brevard’s projected growth at No. 10 in the country among 100 midsized areas, although the study’s co-author says Brevard has the potential to rank even higher when the final numbers come in.

Gross domestic product is a measure of the aggregate value of an area’s goods and services, and is considered a comprehensive indicator of economic activity. Brevard was the only Florida community

to be ranked in the Top 10 on either of the separate lists of projected growth for the 50 largest areas or the 100 midsized areas in the country. Two Texas communities topped those lists — Austin for largest areas and Amarillo for midsized areas.

Brevard County “has really outperformed” other areas of the country, said the study’s co-author, Gerald Cohen, a research professor of finance and chief economist of the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise. “This is an economy that is growing quite rapidly.”



Cohen said Brevard benefited from its science, technology and manufacturing sectors, as well as the presence of Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral Space Force Station and Patrick Space Force Base.

Cohen said, although Brevard is ranked as No. 10 out of 100 midsized communities in the study for projected growth this year, he sees the area as having the potential to be in the Top 3 when all is said and done.

Although Cohen cautions that there is increasing uncertainty overall in the U.S. economy because of the national economic policy on tariffs and other factors, he added that, for Brevard, “the future looks very bright.”

Anne Conroy-Baiter, president and CEO of the Melbourne Regional Chamber, said Brevard’s more diverse business

sectors are helping the community be insulated from national economic ups and downs.

She cited, for example, the growth of aerospace and defense companies in the Melbourne and Palm Bay areas, as well as the highly rated higher-education institutions like Florida Institute of Technology and Eastern Florida State College.

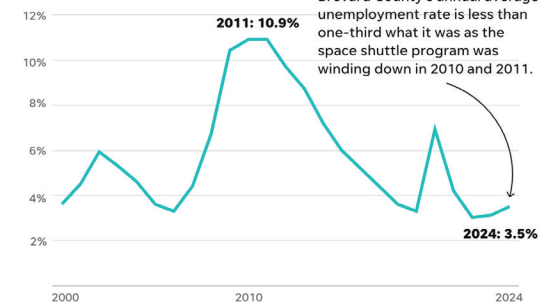
A wild card is the potential move of NASA headquarters from Washington to the Space Coast, something that is being suggested by state and local officials.

Conroy-Baiter said the health care industry also is strong in Brevard — and growing.

Although Orlando Health in April closed the run-down, 298-bed Rockledge Hospital just six months after purchasing it in October as part of Steward Health Care’s bankruptcy proceedings, Orlando Health plans a \$750 million expansion in Brevard County. That includes \$600 million on a new hospital; \$30 million each for three new stand-alone emergency departments in north, central and south Brevard; and \$60 million on new medical pavilions, physician practices, and other facilities and services — all at still-to-be-announced locations.

Meanwhile, Suntree-based Health First is building a new \$410 million, 120-bed hospital off State Road 520 on Merritt Island that is scheduled to open in early-2027 to replace its Cape Canaveral Hospital in Cocoa Beach. Health First also plans to open two new free-standing emergency departments, including one in Rockledge, as well as expand facilities at its existing full-service hospitals.

Unemployment rate drops



SOURCE Florida Department of Commerce, Bureau of Workforce Statistics and Economic Research
Stephen J. Beard/USA TODAY

"Health First continues to thrive" in Brevard, Conroy-Baiter said, while Titusville-based Parrish Healthcare is planning its own expansions in North Brevard.

Diverse job sectors

Education and health care combined account for 16% of the jobs in Brevard, making that one of the top job-creating sectors, according to the Kenan Institute/Fifth Third study.

Other large employment sectors include trade and transportation, including retailing (16%); business services, including scientific and technical services (15%); manufacturing (13%); and leisure and hospitality (12%).

Employment by sector in Brevard County

Job sector as a percentage of Brevard's workforce, compared to the U.S.

Conroy-Baiter said Brevard County also is being helped by a trend sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. As more workers are finding that they can work remotely, some are opting to move to Brevard while continuing to work for a company whose operations are elsewhere.

| Sector | Brevard | Nationwide |
|--|---------|------------|
| Education and health care | 16 | 17 |
| Trade and transportation, including retailing | 16 | 18 |
| Business services, including scientific and technical services | 15 | 14 |
| Manufacturing | 13 | 8 |
| Leisure and hospitality | 12 | 11 |
| Government | 11 | 15 |
| Construction | 7 | 6 |
| Other services | 5 | 4 |
| Finance and real estate | 3 | 6 |
| Information | 1 | 2 |

SOURCE The Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina and Fifth Third Bank.
Stephen J. Beard/USA TODAY

Conroy-Baiter said Viera seems to be "the place of choice" for many newcomers to the area, with its more urban feel, while being not far from the beaches.



Eva Rey, senior vice president for community management and communications at The Viera Co., one of Florida's larger master-planned communities, describes Brevard County as being in "a great economic bubble" — in a positive way. She says the Space Coast is insulated from downturns by its relatively diverse components, encompassing such sectors as space, aerospace, defense, health and tourism.

That helps keep the county somewhat protected from national and regional economic concerns like interest rates, inflation and rising property-insurance rates.

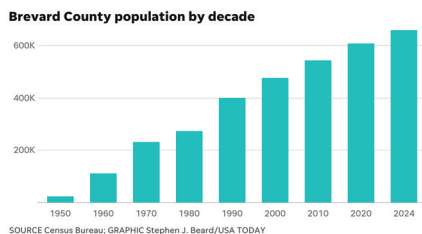
"Overall, we do have a positive outlook," Rey said, with Viera itself projected to double in population from the current figure of about 38,700 to about 77,400 by 2045.

That would rank the unincorporated community of Viera — if it were a city — as among the largest of Brevard's 16 cities and towns, based on population. The largest currently are Palm Bay (2024 population estimated at 140,199), Melbourne (87,846) and Titusville (50,462).

'We rose from the ashes'

Keith Winsten, CEO of the Brevard Zoo in Viera, moved to Viera more than 20 years ago from suburban Chicago to take a job at the zoo. He said he's not surprised by the growth in the area and by the strong economy.

"I think we rose from the ashes, really," after the end of the space shuttle program, Winsten said. "Our community has a thriving economy. People are coming here from all over the country. I'm bullish on Brevard County."



But Winsten cautions that, with the growth, community leaders also must concentrate on maintaining the area's quality of life. That includes investing in such things as improving conditions in the Indian River Lagoon; finding ways to make housing more affordable; protecting wild natural spaces; and making sure roads, sewage systems and other infrastructure are able to handle the growing population counts.

"If we stop investing" in quality-of-life issues, Winsten said, "then I will have really big concerns."

Florida has been investing in Brevard, with recent installments toward the Indian River Lagoon. In March, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced \$100 million in state grants for 25 projects to improve water quality in the lagoon, including improvements to sewer plants and converting neighborhoods on septic tanks to central-sewer hookups.



That money is meant, in part, to bolster local efforts to heal the lagoon as decades of pollution from septic tanks, sewage and runoff from fertilizer-fueled toxic algal blooms that killed most of the lagoon's seagrass and resulted in mass manatee die-offs in recent years.

Brevard voters approved a half-percent sales tax in 2016 to help pay for lagoon cleanups. Voters also have chosen by wide margins to tax themselves multiple times over the years to buy environmentally endangered lands along the mainland and beachside.

Economic growth compared to other Florida communities

Over the past 10 years Brevard County ranked No. 2 for economic growth among 100 midsize metro areas.

| Brevard County | Last 10 years | | | Last five years | | | 2025 projected | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|--------|----------------|--------|--------|
| | No. 2 | No. 1 | No. 10 | No. 2 | No. 1 | No. 10 | No. 2 | No. 1 | No. 10 |
| Destin | No. 3 | No. 6 | No. 11 | No. 3 | No. 6 | No. 11 | No. 3 | No. 6 | No. 11 |
| Fort Myers/Cape Coral | No. 5 | No. 3 | No. 18 | No. 5 | No. 3 | No. 18 | No. 5 | No. 3 | No. 18 |
| Gainesville | No. 18 | No. 20 | No. 26 | No. 18 | No. 20 | No. 26 | No. 18 | No. 20 | No. 26 |
| Ocala | No. 7 | No. 9 | No. 19 | No. 7 | No. 9 | No. 19 | No. 7 | No. 9 | No. 19 |
| Pensacola | No. 29 | No. 25 | No. 48 | No. 29 | No. 25 | No. 48 | No. 29 | No. 25 | No. 48 |
| Sarasota/North Port | No. 4 | No. 7 | No. 21 | No. 4 | No. 7 | No. 21 | No. 4 | No. 7 | No. 21 |
| Tallahassee | No. 30 | No. 19 | No. 80 | No. 30 | No. 19 | No. 80 | No. 30 | No. 19 | No. 80 |

SOURCE The Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina and Fifth Third Bank.
GRAPHIC Stephen J. Beard/USA TODAY

'Area of innovation and growth'

Recalling the end of the space shuttle program and reflecting of what the Space Coast economy is now, Micah Loyd, owner of Titusville-based Loyd Contracting, said: "We've kind of come back a long ways, and we're an area of innovation and growth."

The commercial space companies have "put us back on the map," said Loyd, who also is a Canaveral Port Authority commissioner and a former member of the North Brevard Economic Development Zone Special District Board. "We're in that sweet spot. The economic outlook is very good. We're in a much better place than we were in 2011."

Lynda Weatherman is president and CEO of the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast, whose marketing campaign for the Space Coast has the theme of "Tomorrow Launches Here."

Weatherman cited the rapid growth of space and aerospace manufacturing and assembly since Atlantis' final flight as a "paradigm shift," as Brevard evolved from its former, simpler role as merely America's rocket launch site.

As landmark economic events that helped set Brevard on its growth trajectory, she pointed to the EDC's efforts to recruit Embraer, which built its North American jet-building campus at Melbourne Orlando International Airport, and Lockheed Martin, which landed NASA's Orion crewed spacecraft program for assembly and checkout services.

"This is one of the most profound things about this community of many things that are profound: We have the intellectual business infrastructure of a major metropolis. Yet we do it in a small, scalable community. So that makes us unique," Weatherman said.

"Everything that you point to that a bigger metropolis would have: Fortune 500 companies. A port — much less a spaceport. Airports. It's right here. I don't think there's many places that have that combination," Weatherman said.

10 midsize metro areas expected to sustain the most economic growth in 2025



1. Amarillo, Texas
2. Omaha, Nebraska
3. Fayetteville-Springdale, Arkansas
4. Des Moines, Iowa
5. Visalia, California
6. Boise, Idaho
7. Charleston, South Carolina
8. Santa Barbara, California
9. Huntsville, Alabama
10. Space Coast, Florida

SOURCE The Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina and Fifth Third Bank; GRAPHIC Stephen J. Beard/USA TODAY

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