
Community Profile

Charleston County

Charleston County is located along the southeastern coast of South Carolina. It has a land area of 919 square miles and a 97-mile coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. The county, with a 2000 population of 309,969, is the center of the Trident metropolitan region with a combined population of more than 500,000. The county has 16 municipalities within its borders, including its three largest cities, Charleston (96,650), North Charleston (79,641) and Mt. Pleasant (47,609). The Town of James Island was formed in May 2002, with the total population of the Town still being determined. In the decade from 1990-2000, the county experienced a growth rate of 4.8 percent, per the census figures (which Charleston County believes are understated). A recent study by the Strom Thurmond Institute of Clemson University conjectured that the region could attract 250,000 people during the next 30 years.

Key among the region's advantages are its geographic location, its natural beauty, moderate climate, and a coveted quality of life which has been deliberately and carefully protected. Charleston's coastal location along the Atlantic Seaboard at the confluence of two rivers assures its near tropical climate and creates natural advantages for a seaport. The flat topography which is accented by numerous rivers, tidal creeks, vast expanses of pristine salt marshes, and hallmark live oaks, provides a lush, picturesque backdrop for the priceless eighteenth and nineteenth-century architecture of Old Charleston. Beyond the old city lie vibrant growing urban and suburban communities hosting businesses, industries, and residences alike. "Livability" and "good quality of life" are multifaceted terms which are difficult to adequately define or measure, but easy to observe intuitively. The most telling evidence of the region's livability may lie in the fact that, despite its growth of the past two decades, Charleston has retained the "slow, friendly pace" which visitors most often cite as their favorite impression. Perhaps they gain this impression by visiting area hotels, restaurants, shops, parks, resorts, golf courses, and beaches, or one of the numerous cultural festivals the region hosts throughout the year.

Numerous other advantages accrue to the region due to its diverse economic base, its infrastructure, and its educational network. The region's economic base includes the Port of Charleston which is fourth in container volume in the United States and second only to the Port of New York and New Jersey in container volume along the East Coast and Gulf. Tourism has long been an economic mainstay in this historic eighteenth century setting and continues to grow in importance. The region's visitor industry has expanded rapidly over the past few years, today experiencing four million visitors in year 2000, contributing more than \$3.7 billion annually to the area's economy, and providing an estimated 69,700 jobs. The region's growing international operations, stable businesses and industrial bases also contribute to its diverse economic base and have helped to mitigate the downsizing of the military establishment. In addition to the existing port, modern airport and good rail access, the region is committed to the constant upgrading of its already excellent highway access. Road improvements persist, including the completion of the I-526 Beltway linking the region and the replacement of the Cooper River Bridges with higher spans linking Charleston with the area east of the Cooper River which is currently under construction. Water and waste water system expansions, as well as utility and telecommunications network upgrades are presently under way to meet the demands of growth and maintain the region's competitive edge. The region's educational institutions comprise a strong backbone for industry, with a variety of liberal arts graduate and undergraduate programs at three colleges and universities, advanced medical degrees at the state's largest medical complex and teaching hospital, and the diverse industrial training

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programs of the Trident Technical College, the largest campus of one of the nation's "cutting edge" state technical college systems. In 1998, Charleston County spearheaded a successful effort to create the Trident One-Stop Career Center. This multi-jurisdictional center, lauded by the U.S. Department of Labor, combines a variety of resources including career counseling, job search, training programs, and labor market information under one roof.

Despite the 1993 Base Realignment and Closure Commission's (BRAC) decision to close much of the Charleston Naval Complex, the military remains viable and significant in the Charleston region. The Charleston Air Force Base is undergoing constant expansion and has been designated as home to the first operational squadron of the new C-17 transport plane. Through the dedicated efforts of its U.S. Senators and Congressmen, as well as State and local officials, and the Charleston Chamber of Commerce, the region has also gained significant new Army and Navy facilities.

As the Charleston region enters the 21st century, the future appears bright. Despite the national economic downturn, tourism is still strong and the region continues to capitalize on its many assets; its harbor and port; its industrial sites; its climate, environment, and quality of life; its labor force and work ethic; its colleges and technical training programs; its many business incentives and cost advantages; and its "can-do" spirit. In an age of international linkages and entrepreneurial opportunity, Charleston County, South Carolina is literally the preeminent Southeastern "Gateway to the World."