

# Community Background Report

## City of Belle Glade

### Boundaries

North: Curlee Road

South: State Road 80

West: Lake Okeechobee

East: Extends east on East Gator Blvd

**Community Type:** Municipality

### History<sup>1</sup>

The City of Belle Glade covers 4.6 square miles on the southeastern shore of Lake Okeechobee in western Palm Beach County. It is the largest city within the Everglades. Originally known as Hillsboro, it was governed by the Hillsboro Community Council, formed in 1919, until the community incorporated as the City of Belle Glade on April 9, 1928 with a population of less than 500.

The area's earliest known inhabitants were the Calusa Indians. Because of drainage problems associated with the city's proximity to Lake Okeechobee (the second largest freshwater lake within the continental US), the area was not developed until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Construction of three canals (Hillsboro, North New River and Miami Canals) designed to control the flow of Lake Okeechobee began in 1912 and was completed in 1913. As a result of a powerful hurricane on September 16, 1928, water from Lake Okeechobee overflowed, destroying many homes and killing 2,500 people. In the wake of the disaster President Herbert Hoover visited Belle Glade in 1929 and planned construction of the Hoover Dike, an 85-mile levee around the lake.

Today the economy of Belle Glade relies on agriculture, sports, and fishing tourism on Lake Okeechobee. Along with neighboring Clewiston, Belle Glade grows about half of all sugarcane in the United States. Celery, lettuce, sweet corn, ornamental plants and sod are also grown. The Everglades Experiment Station, established in Belle Glade in 1921, has recently been renamed Agricultural Research and Education Center and is affiliated with University of Florida.

## Community Dynamics<sup>2</sup>

The City of Belle Glade identifies itself in terms of its proximity to Lake Okeechobee. Its economy depends on tourism around the lake and the fertile soil in the flood zone. The city's motto is "Her Soil is Her Fortune", which accentuates the heavy focus placed on agriculture in Belle Glade. Though located in the South Florida region, in cultural terms Belle Glade is more closely associated with the Florida Heartland.

Tourism to Lake Okeechobee is centered on fishing and camping, with 350 campsites surrounding the lake. Belle Glade borders the Hoover Dike, a levee 85 miles in length with a varying height of no less than 34 feet. This levee is at least five feet above the highest level ever reached by Lake Okeechobee.

The Belle Glade Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) is involved in several projects aimed at beautifying the City and eliminating barriers to a better quality of life in the area. Projects include providing affordable housing and revitalizing downtown Belle Glade. The Belle Glade CRA is also working with the City of Belle Glade to provide improvements to Hands Park (installation of a split-rail fence); the construction of the Youth Empowerment Center; major renovations to Airport Park (including the construction of a football field); renovations to the boating and campground facilities and restrooms of Torry Island; and improvements to the Belle Glade Marina (including removal of sediment from the Marina, replacing fixed piers, and constructing a fish cleaning station). The Florida East Coast Rail Company holds the rights to the railroad tracks that run through the center of town.

The Belle Glade State Municipal Airport connects Belle Glade to other cities. The airport is a 96-acre facility with one active runway. In 1990, the City of Belle Glade together with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) began implementing a program to improve the airport and enhance its economic contribution to the city.

## Demographic Highlights<sup>3</sup>

***The median household income of residents in Belle Glade is considerably lower than that of the rest of Palm Beach County.***

In 2009 the median household income in Belle Glade was \$29,229, whereas the median household income in Palm Beach county was \$62,114.

***The population of Belle Glade has been decreasing, and this downward trend is forecasted to continue.***

Belle Glade's population decreased 6% between 2000 (14,906 people) and 2009 (13,983 people), and is forecasted to decrease another 2% between 2009 and 2014 (to 13,651 people).

***The majority of residents of Belle Glade identify themselves as Black and Hispanic.***

In 2009 55% of Belle Glade's residents identified themselves as Black, and 33% identified themselves as Hispanic.

***The majority of residents of Belle Glade have a high school diploma or less.***

In 2009 47% of residents of Belle Glade had less than a high school diploma, and 25% had graduated from high school. Only 3% had an Associate's degree, 7% a Bachelor's degree, and 3% a graduate degree.

***More than half of residents in Belle Glade speak English and are native-born citizens.***

In 2009 64% of residents of Belle Glade spoke English, and 73% of residents were native-born citizens. Spanish was the second most commonly spoken language in Belle Glade, used among 27% of residents of Belle Glade.

***Belle Glade has a significantly higher percentage of households with no vehicles than Palm Beach County.***

In 2009 21% of households in Belle Glade had no vehicle, compared to 6% in Palm Beach County. 1-vehicle households in Belle Glade comprised 40%, which is similar to the county's 42%. In addition, 2-vehicle households in Belle Glade comprised only 30%, compared to 41% in Palm Beach County.

## **Transportation Trends<sup>4</sup>**

Belle Glade is easily accessible from U.S. 27 or U.S. 441. The city is 45 miles west of the Palm Beaches and the Atlantic Ocean, 80 miles north of Miami, and 90 miles east of Ft. Myers and the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>5</sup> The majority of employed individuals in Belle Glade own a motorized vehicle, but take, on average, much less time to get to work than do residents of the rest of Palm Beach County (40% of Belle Glade residents take less than 15 minutes to get to work, whereas only 20% of Palm Beach County residents take less than 15 minutes to get to work). Though the majority of employed individuals in Belle Glade drive a car, truck or van to work, the percentage of drivers is lower (85%, projected for 2014) than that of the county (92%, projected for 2014). In addition, households in Belle Glade spend considerably less on transportation than do households in Palm Beach County (in 2009, \$6,521 in Belle Glade vs. \$9,162 in Palm Beach County).

The tables below illustrate projected transportation trends in the City of Belle Glade:

Average household transportation costs:

2009: City, \$6,521.31/County, \$9,162.52

2014: City, \$7,888.92/County, \$11,276.10

Average household transportation costs for public transportation:

2009: City, \$306.74/County, \$607.69

2014: City, \$376.81/County, \$783.55

Forecasted travel time to work for the employed population, 2014:

Work at home: City, 2 percent/County, 5 percent  
Less than 15 minutes: City, 40 percent/County, 20 percent  
15-29 minutes: City, 25 percent /County, 37 percent  
30-59 minutes: City, 22 percent /County, 31 percent  
60+ minutes: City, 11 percent /County, 7 percent

Forecasted means of transportation to work for employed individuals, 2014:

Car, Truck, Van to Work: City, 85 percent / County, 92 percent  
Public Transportation to Work: City, 9 percent / County, 1 percent  
Other Transportation to Work: City, 4 percent / County, 2 percent

Forecasted number of vehicles per household, 2014:

No vehicles: City, 19 percent / County, 6 percent  
1 vehicle: City, 40 percent / County, 41 percent  
2 vehicles: City, 29 percent / County, 42 percent  
3 vehicles: City, 9 percent / County, 9 percent  
4+ vehicles: City, 2 percent / County, 2 percent

## Special Events

**Black Gold Jubilee** - Palm Beach County's Belle Glade, which is known for rich "Black Gold" soil, celebrates harvest's end for winter vegetables in April. A 5K walk / run is followed by the Jubilee Parade, country fixin's, rides, and fireworks. Call (561) 996-2745 for more information.

## Business Landscape

A 2007 study commissioned by the Florida Department of Community Affairs stated that there were initiatives to develop the Torry Island Marina in Belle Glade. At that time there was an RV Campground with various trails for recreational use on the land where the marina was planned.<sup>6</sup> City officials have expressed an interest in developing this area for recreation purposes including kayaking, canoeing and camping. In 2006, the governor "signed off on \$1.5 million for the economically depressed city to use on an engineering study for the [boat] lock."<sup>1</sup> The boat lock would allow boats to move between different water levels as they travel the Hillsboro Canal, which runs through Belle Glade's downtown area into Lake Okeechobee. Belle Glade is planning an \$8.4 million project to revitalize its downtown with street improvements, including street lights and sidewalks, and building facades.<sup>7</sup> The federal government has awarded the city a \$1.2 million grant to fund this effort and another \$2.6 million in low interest loans. The goal of this development effort is to recreate key properties in downtown as waterfront properties. Many of these properties are located within ~~special~~ designated flood hazard areas. The city is coordinating with the Palm Beach County Emergency Management Office and other agencies in

the development of an emergency transit plan to ensure smooth evacuation of these areas before tropical storms and hurricanes.<sup>8</sup> The City's Comprehensive Plan includes detailed maps and policies to allow expansion of service areas and annexation of nearby property.<sup>9</sup>

Government is a large employer with approximately one in five residents in the civilian labor force (20%) employed by the different government agencies in Belle Glade. The top occupations are management, professional and related occupations (22% of the labor force); sales and office occupations (20%); production, transportation, and material moving (16%); service occupations (15%); and farming, fishing, and forestry occupations (15%). In the 2008-2009 fiscal year, Belle Glade had a budget of \$9,045,240. Just over \$4,000,000 in revenues came from taxes. Of this sum, \$150,375 came from local business taxes. Personal and real estate taxes generated over \$2,000,000.<sup>10</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> City of Belle Glade. 2010. About Us. <http://www.bellegladedgov.com>

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section available from the Belle Glade municipal website, <http://bellegladedgov.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all statistics cited in this section downloaded from [www.simplymap.com](http://www.simplymap.com)

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all statistics cited in this section downloaded from [www.simplymap.com](http://www.simplymap.com)

<sup>5</sup> Belle Glade Chamber of Commerce. 2010. <http://bellegladechamber.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Belle Glade Chamber of Commerce. 2010. <http://www.bellegladechamber.com>

<sup>7</sup> City of Belle Glade. 2009. Parks and Recreation Department. <http://www.bellegladedgov.com>

<sup>8</sup> City of Belle Glade. 2009. Planning and Community Redevelopment Services. <http://www.bellegladedgov.com>

<sup>9</sup> City of Belle Glade Office of the City Manager. (2009). February Update of Current and Future Projects within the City. [http://www.egovlink.com/public\\_documents300/belleglade/published\\_documents/Planning%20and%20Building/JANUARY%20CURRENT%20AND%20FUTURE%20PROJECTS%20LISTING01-16-09.pdf](http://www.egovlink.com/public_documents300/belleglade/published_documents/Planning%20and%20Building/JANUARY%20CURRENT%20AND%20FUTURE%20PROJECTS%20LISTING01-16-09.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> City of Belle Glade Directory of Officials City Commission. (2008). Adopted Budget Fiscal Year October 1, 2008 to September 30, 2009. <http://www.bellegladedgov.com>