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**I. COUNTY PROFILE INTRODUCTION**

Washington County, named after President George Washington, has previously been identified as having a composition of approximately 391,121 acres (611 square miles), with 23,040 acres (36 square miles) being water and 368,081 acres (575 square miles) land.\* Originally, the county spanned more than 5,000 square miles before being divided to form Jackson, Walton, Bay, Calhoun, Okaloosa, Franklin and Holmes counties. Created in 1825 and located in the approximate center of the Florida Panhandle and the Chotawhatchee River, transportation for settlers in the area and transport for the lumber and wood harvested from the vast forestlands present in the area contributed to the growth of the area. Today, the County extends 41 miles north to south, and 44 miles east to west and is landlocked. Borders are shared with Holmes County and Jackson County to the north, Bay County to the south, Jackson County to the east and Holmes County, Walton County and the Choctawhatchee River to the west.

Washington County derives its beauty and heritage from the land and is reflected in its resilient and resourceful citizens who know and understand the importance preserving the natural resources that are prolific within the county. Being located in the Florida Panhandle provides both residents and guests with an array in shopping, church activities, dining, recreational, and employment opportunities. Excellent schools and medical facilities are available; parks and recreational areas abound in the area. The County retains the charm of a small town and rural lifestyle.

One of the most defining features of the county are the large number of lakes that exists throughout the county, the pristine springs, and an undeveloped atmosphere that provides for a rural way of life that many of its residents prefer. Much of Washington County is undeveloped, with most of the population residing in/or around the municipalities of Chipley, Caryville, Ebro, Vernon, and Wausau. Sunny Hills, a private subdivision experiencing added growth in recent years, has been designated as a Municipal Services Benefit Unit (MSBU) growth in the County.

The soils within Washington County are mostly of the Marianna series. Washington County is one of eight counties in the Panhandles that are designated as Rural Areas of Critical Economic Concern (RACEC). The three rural counties are Holmes, Walton and Washington. Holmes and Washington Counties as well as the City of Freeport are designated as RACEC.

\*An audit of the land area of the County indicates that this figure may be slightly higher than what is indicated by the Future Land Use Elements Amendments. Adjustments, if necessary, will be made during the EAR-based amendment process.

**II. MUNICIPALITIES AND UNINCORPORATED WASHINGTON COUNTY**

There are six municipalities within the county. Four (excluding Chipley) rely on the Washington County Planning Office and the Washington County Comprehensive Plan for guidance in planning and

growth issues. The City of Chipley does utilize the services of the Washington County Building Inspection Services, but operates independently of the County on planning issues. The combined areas of all the towns including Chipley, is 9,388 acres of land with a total estimated population in 2005 of 5,436. Population for unincorporated part of the County is 17,661. Table 1 is a breakdown of the distribution of the population over the County's towns and unincorporated areas.

- A. Caryville. Caryville is located in the extreme northwest corner of Washington County on the Choctawhatchee River, with a large portion of the town located in a flood zone. Transportation routes to the town are I-10, SR 90, CR 279 and CR 173. In the past, the frequency of floods and the buyout program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have contributed to a drop in population for the years between 1990 and 2000. While this recent decrease in population has remained, there has been no significant growth primarily due to development restrictions on areas within the flood plains and the lack of suitable property for development, either for commercial or residential purposes. There are 173 addressed structures in the town and twenty-eight businesses, churches, cemeteries, or communication towers and 145 residences. The Florida Department of Corrections facility work camp is located in the town and adjacent to the I-10 interchange. Other than the work camp, there is no other major employer in the town. There are 1,542 acres in Caryville
  
- B. Chipley. Chipley is the county seat of Washington County and is located in the northeast corner of the County. This gives the City access to markets in Holmes and Jackson Counties, as well as Washington County. The City is served by several transportation alternatives, including I-10 (with a Chipley interchange), SR 77 which travels north/south and links the Panama City area, two east/west arterials (US 90 and SR 273), and CR 77-A that acts as a major collector. The City is also bisected by the CSX railroad with Amtrak service temporarily suspended due to Hurricane Katrina. The County's major employers are located within the city limits. There are three public schools and one vocational school located within the city limits. While Chipley's Comprehensive Plan and growth management remains under the control of the City, it is mentioned here due to the significant impact and influence on the rest of the county. There is central water and sewer service provided within the city limits. Chipley consist of 2,367 acres according to their Comprehensive Plan; however, an additional 17 acres (Martin Woods) have been annexed into the City, making the total size for the City 2,384 acres.
  
- C. Ebro. Ebro is located at the intersections of SR 79 and SR 20 in southwest Washington County. Washington County Kennel Club provides employment to residents of Ebro and the immediately surrounding area. Commercial development is comprised of a convenience store, motel, and restaurant. Portions of the town are in a flood plain and development is restricted to locations in higher elevations. No central water or wastewater treatment services are available in this area and this may account for the slow growth. It is expected that the future move of the Bay County International Airport to a location south of Ebro in Bay County and the widening of SR 79 to a four-lane facility will stimulate economic growth. The construction of a Lewis Bear Distribution Center warehouse will begin in 2007, with some employment opportunities being made available for Washington County residents. There are 181 addressed structures in the town. Thirty-six (36) are businesses, churches, cemeteries, or communication towers and there are 145 residential units. The total acreage for Ebro has been listed shown as 1,799 acres; however, in the 1970's, Pine Log Forest was annexed into the Town and this has not been

previously noted in any land use adjustments. Adding this acreage brings the total size of Ebro to 3,962, and thereby reducing the overall number of acres in the unincorporated areas of the County.

- D. Vernon. The geographical center of the county is Vernon and is located on Holmes Creek at the crossroads of SR 79, CR 277, and CR 279. Vernon faces many changes in the coming years with the Florida Department of Transportation's four-lane project of SR 79. This project will result in the taking of property from the downtown business district, creating the need for the town and merchants to look elsewhere for accommodations for a grocery store and other shops. The largest employer within the town is the Washington County School District with three schools located in the immediate area. Other than small businesses, restaurants, gas stations, and a few small shops, there are no major businesses offering employment in Vernon. The Town does have a central water and sewer system. The Department of Environmental Protection has recently approved the provision of new hookups by the town to the newly installed sewage infrastructure that will increase over sewer capacity. This may affect and encourage both residential and commercial in the community. There are 584 addressed structures in the town. One hundred twenty six (126) are businesses, churches, cemeteries, or communication towers. The remaining 458 are residential. There are 2,989 acres within the town limits of Vernon.
- E. Wausau. Wausau is located approximately 6 miles to the south of Chipley on SR 77 and CR 278. The surrounding community is largely residential. Although there are no major employers within Wausau, the Washington County Correctional Institute is located to the south of Wausau and provides employment to some residents within the Wausau municipal limits. No construction funds have been allocated for the Washington County SR 77 four-lane project, but in the event that this project is funded, it is expected that the widening will have minimal impact on the town as FDOT will utilize a bypass. There is a central water system, but no central sewer system. There are 241 addressed structures in the Town of Wausau. Twenty-nine (29) are businesses, churches, cemeteries, or communication towers. The remaining 212 are residential. There are 775 acres in Wausau.
- F. Unincorporated Washington County. The unincorporated sections of the county are experiencing steady growth, especially in the southeastern section of Washington County around the many lakes and the unincorporated areas of Sunny Hills. Many residents of Bay County choose to live a more tranquil life style while commuting to their workplaces in the adjacent county. Some retirees are choosing the County to build their new retirement homes. While the rural attractions of the County are one reason to live Washington County, there is a lack of economic development opportunities that could provide for the large-scale employment of residents. There are no major employers located in the unincorporated areas of Washington County other than the Washington County Correctional Institute. There are 15,023 addressed structures in the County. One thousand six-hundred sixty-four (1,664) are businesses, churches, cemeteries, or communication towers. The remaining structures in the County are residential. There are four thousand seven hundred ninety-seven (4,797) mobile homes in the County. The unincorporated area within the County is 379,456 acres.

Area	Acreage	% of County	Square Miles	Remarks
Caryville	1,542	0.39 %	2.4	
Chipley	2,384	0.61 %	3.7	Includes annexation of Martin Woods into the City (17 acres)
Ebro	3,975	1.02 %	6.2	Includes annexation of a 12-acre tract and Pine Log Forest (2,367 acres)
Vernon	2,989	0.76%	4.7	
Wausau	775	0.2 %	1.2	
Incorporated County	379,456	97.02 %	593	This includes 2,396 as described above
Total County	391,121	100%	611	

Source: Washington County Planning Office - Acreage of Land Use In Washington County

### III. QUALITY OF LIFE

Of utmost importance to all the residents of Washington County is a good quality of life, which includes both time for work and quality time for family and friends. This unhurried lifestyle gives growing families the opportunity to provide strong values and spiritual foundations to their children. It also provides for an ideal location for retirees who wish to leave the hustle and bustle of their working lives in larger communities. As outlined below, many different factors contribute to the appeal of the Washington County lifestyle

A. Transportation. Roads. Important to all communities for flexibility and growth is a transportation system that provides easy access for all that travel within. Washington County's road system is such that it provides quick and efficient travel to all points within the County. Major roads in the county include the east-west Interstate 10, U.S. Highway 90, and State Road 20. State Roads 77, 79, and 277 run north to south and connect residents of the State of Alabama to the coastal attractions in Florida. US 90 and I-10 run parallel across northern portions of the county near Chipley and Caryville. SR 20 passes along the southern portions of the county and bisects the community of Ebro. SR 77 and SR 90 run through Chipley. SR 77 also enters Wausau and passes near the Washington County Correctional Institute on its way to Panama City.

SR 79 enters the County below the City of Bonifay in Holmes County and passes through Vernon and Ebro on its way to Panama City Beach. SR 79 will be undergoing a four-lane upgrade from the Bay County line north to Interstate 10 within the next 2 to 3 years. SR 77 is also scheduled for four lane upgrades when the funding becomes available.

There are approximately 334 additional miles of paved county-maintained roads in the county and 507 miles of unpaved roads. Road issues will be discussed in greater detail in the Transportation Element review of this document.

The other modes of transportation include the railroad system, the Tri-County Airport and the surrounding airports. These will be discussed in greater detail in the Transportation Element review of this document.

- B. Education. Education excellence is of paramount importance in Washington County with an 81.8% graduation rate with 59.7% of students going on to higher education studies
1. Public Secondary Schools. The Washington County Public School District oversees two high schools (Chipley and Vernon), two middle schools (Chipley and Vernon) and two elementary schools (Chipley and Vernon), as well as the Washington-Holmes Technical Center located in Chipley (WHTC). WHTC offers many and varied vocational courses. The Panhandle Area Education Consortium (PAEC) is headquartered in Washington County, providing excellent teacher training.
  2. Colleges. Access to institutions of higher education is within easy reach: Chipola Jr. College (Marianna), Florida State University (Panama City Campus), and Gulf Coast Community College (Panama City).
- C. Medical Services. Northwest Florida Community Hospital, affiliated with Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola, is an 81-bed community hospital located in Chipley. The hospital is fully accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations and licensed by the State of Florida and certified by Medicare and Medicaid. The hospital offers a range of services: medical and surgical inpatient care; a 24-hour physician staffed Emergency Room; a full-service imaging department; out-patient surgery; rural health clinics; women's health services; physical, occupational and speech therapy; respiratory therapy; cardiopulmonary services; laboratory services; a dialysis unit; short- and long-term care facilities; and home health services.
- D. Recreational Opportunities. Washington County attracts people because of the natural beauty that abounds in the many spring fed creeks and the beautiful woodlands of the area. Washington County has a wealth of recreational resources for just about everyone. The Choctawhatchee River and Econfina Creek are excellent canoeing, tubing and rafting sites. Falling Waters State Recreation Area provides excellent opportunities for hiking, bird watching, swimming and camping. Primitive camping is available at many of the family-oriented county parks that have been developed and maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department. Freshwater fishing in the County is unsurpassed as are the lakes that afford skiing opportunities for the professional and amateur skier. There are five community centers that can be reserved for use by the public.
- E. Security Protection. Washington County is provided law enforcement services by the Washington County Sheriffs= Department for all areas outside the city limits of Chipley. The State Highway Patrol also provides law enforcement services primarily related to control of traffic within the County. Fire protection services are provided by several volunteer fire departments over the entire county.
- F. Climate. The climate in Washington County is humid subtropical with 71 inches of annual rainfall distributed throughout the year. The average temperature is about 66 degrees Fahrenheit with the average minimum for January being 42 degrees Fahrenheit and the average maximum for July is 91 degrees.

G. Topography and Physiography. The topography of Washington County is quite hilly, with elevations ranging from 20 feet above Mean Sea Level in the Choctawhatchee River basin south of Ebro to over 245 feet above mean sea level near Wausau. Washington County is divided into two physiographic regions:

1. The Marianna Lowlands
2. The Gulf Coastal Lowlands

The Marianna Lowlands cover most of the county where Chipley and Wausau are located. Caryville, Vernon, and Ebro are located in the Gulf Coast Lowlands, in the southern and western areas of the County.

H. General Geology. Washington County lies within the East Gulf Coastal Plain, a subdivision of the Coastal Plain. As noted already, Washington County is divided into the two physiographic regions of the Marianna Lowlands and the Gulf Coast Lowlands.

The Marianna Lowlands occupy most of central and eastern Washington County and are as a result of steam erosion and solution activity. Limestone is near the surface of the ground and consequently, the area is one of karsts development with many sinkholes. Many broad, shallow basins are present, some of which are filled with water, forming lakes.

The Gulf Coastal lowlands are a series of coast-parallel plains on terraces rising from the coast to successively levels in a landward direction. These terraces were formed during the Pleistocene Epoch or "Great Ice Age," when world-wide fluctuations of sea level were tied in with the growth and melting of ice caps. The periods of time when sea level was lowered is referred to as glacial stages. This was accomplished by the storing of large quantities of ocean water as land-glaciers. The interglacial stages were those times when the glaciers receded, thus returning the water to the seas and causing a rise in sea level. During each of the interglacial stages, when sea level rose and remained stationary at one elevation for a long enough interval, a terrace or shoreline was formed.

I. Designation of Area of Critical Economic Concern. The Governor of Florida, Lawton Childs, designated Washington County as a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern (RACEC). With this designation, Washington County has better access to government programs that ultimately benefit the citizens by creating more economic opportunities. The "Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern" initiative allows the Governor, through the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), more flexibility in applying criteria requirements or similar provisions of any economic development incentive. REDI is a multi-agency initiative, led and coordinated by the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, that assists rural communities to solve problems that affect their fiscal, economic or community viability.

J. Public Services. Washington County is a rural county that does not necessarily have services available in the undeveloped areas of the County. Parts of the County are without electric service and will only be available there as property is developed. This extension of service is not expected at any time in the near future. Only Chipley and Vernon offer the full array of public services, especially central wastewater treatment and cable television services.

1. Water and Sewage Services. With Washington County primarily existing as a rural county, it has been the policy of the County in the past that supplying utility services to

the entire county is not practical. Therefore, at the present time, no water or sewer service is provided within the County. With the continued growth of the County, this policy is being reexamined with regard to identification of service areas, feasibility and funding. The Town of Ebro does not have a potable water system. Caryville and Wausau both have a central water system. Chipley and Vernon both offer central water and sewage services, while some areas of the Sunny Hills Municipal Services Benefit Unit (MSBU) has both water and sewage services. County residents are primarily required to use septic tanks and private well water.

2. Electric Service Providers. Three different companies provide electrical service to county residents. These include West Florida Electric Co-op, Gulf Coast Electric Co-op, and Gulf Power Company.
3. Phone Services. Several phone companies provide services with the County, with BellSouth being the main providers of land lines.
4. Solid Waste Management. Although garbage service is not mandatory within the County, an exclusive franchise was awarded to Waste Management Services, Inc., who collects and deposits solid waste in the Springhill Land Field in Campbellton. There is also a recycling center located on south of Chipley on SR 77.
5. Cable Television Services. Satellite television services are available county-wide from private providers. Vernon and Chipley have cable services at the present time.

#### **IV. ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE COUNTY**

One of the more positive assets of Washington County for future economic development is its centralized location within the panhandle region and its accessibility via the numerous thoroughfares serving the area. The major employers in Washington County include the Florida Department of Transportation (FOOT), Wal-Mart, WestPoint Stevens, the Northwest Florida Community Hospital, the Washington County Kennel Club, the Washington County Correctional Facility, and the Washington County School District. While the county benefits from such large employers, these seven employers provide approximately 35% of the total county employment. The Washington County Industrial Park is a 220-acre industrial park being developed between Highway 90 and SR 273, directly adjacent to the city limits of Chipley. The park, along with the Tommy MacDonald Industrial Park, is within the State Enterprise Zone making it possible for eligible occupants to qualify for property tax exemptions. The CSX railway will also serve the new industrial park.

1. Taxable Value. According to the Washington County Property Appraiser's Office, a total taxable value of about \$485 million can be identified against the County's real property (not including municipal or school taxable values). The average property value is approximately \$70,000. The actual, no-exemption value of the County's total properties is about \$647 million. A millage rate of 10.0 is in place, and including school taxes (but excluding any water management or municipal millage rates) is 18.781 mils. Primary high tax valued structures in the county include Westpoint Stevens at the Chipley Industrial Park, Wal-Mart Supercenter on SR 77 in Chipley, the Gulf Power building on US 90 east of Chipley, and the Florida Gas Transmission

Compressor Station west of Vernon.

Employment by major sectors in the county is illustrated in Figure 1-1 at the end of this section.

2. **Economic Sectors.** The economic sectors for Washington County are: Public 43.34 percent, Retail 22.03 percent, Service 17.14 percent, Construction 7.18 percent, Transportation 6.04 percent, Finance 1.77 percent, Wholesale 1.42 percent, and Agriculture 1.09 percent. The highest paying sector is the agricultural sector, which pays 93.93 percent of the state average. The county also has several low paying economic sectors. The wholesale sector paid 46.65 percent of the state average. That sector was the lowest in the region. The average county wage was 77.19 percent of the state average, or approximately \$23,125. Wages averaged below those earned in other locations of the state shown by Table 3-1. According to the U.S. Census 2000 and the Florida Legislature’s Office of Economic and Demographic Research, Washington County demonstrated the impact having only 77.19% of the average state wage earned in the manners illustrated in Table 3-1.

Table 3-2. Average Wage per Economic Sector, Washington County Compared to State of Florida (2000)

	Washington County	State of Florida	Percentage	Total County Jobs
Agriculture	\$17,770	\$18,919	93.93%	56
Construction	\$28,633	\$31,667	90.42%	370
Transportation	\$35,515	\$39,031	90.99%	311
Wholesale	\$20,140	\$43,173	46.65%	73
Retail	\$12,781	\$18,563	68.85%	1135
Finance	\$32,916	\$43,714	75.30%	91
Service	\$15,730	\$29,446	53.42%	883
Public	\$29,644	\$33,852	87.57%	2,233
Overall Average	\$23,125	\$29,960	77.19%	5,152

\*Note: State Overall Average was calculated based on the sectors pertaining to Washington County.  
Source: Florida Department of Labor and Employment Security

3. **Poverty Rate.** The overall poverty rate for the County is 19.2% as measured by the 2000 Census. The County ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in Florida for poverty in the person 65 and older category; 3<sup>rd</sup> in female-headed families. Children under the age of 5 comprise 32.8% of the residents under the poverty level.

Table 3-3. Poverty of Residents of Washington County Compared to the State of Florida

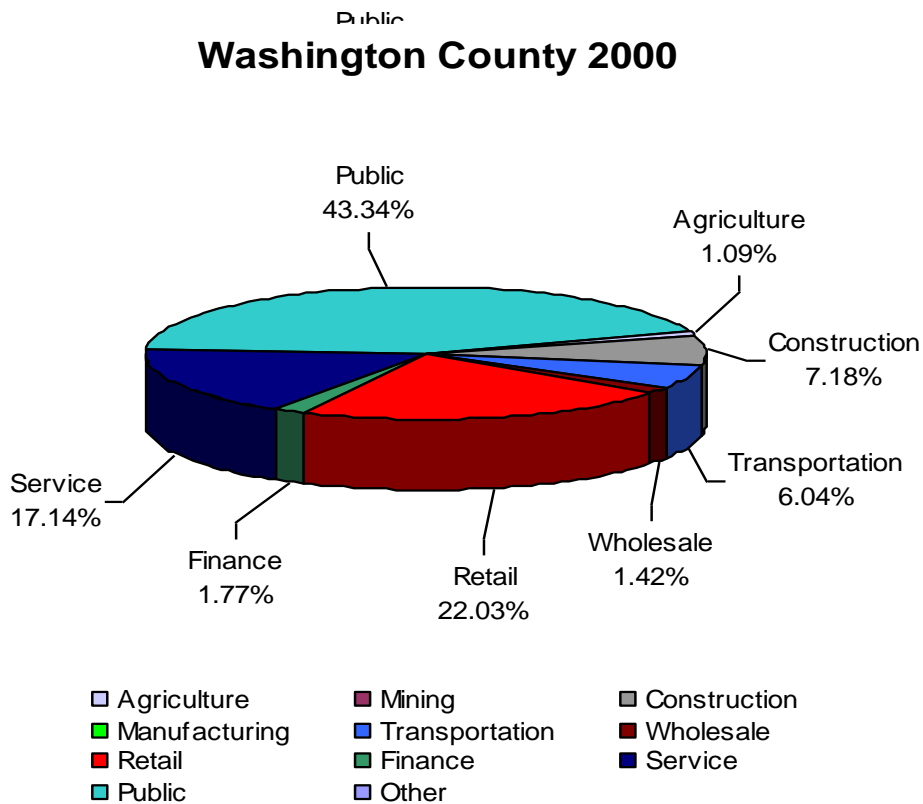
All Persons	19.2%
Persons under 5	32.8%
Persons 65 and Older	19.4% (5 <sup>th</sup> highest in Florida)
All Families	15.4%

Female Headed Families	43.0% (3 <sup>rd</sup> highest in Florida)
Female Headed Families with Children under 5	59.1%

4. Economic Development Council for Washington County. The Economic Development Council is the economic and industrial development committee of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of the Economic Development Council is to promote the establishment of new jobs and payroll through the recruitment of new business and industry and to encourage and to assist with expansion of existing business and industry. The ideal location of the County serves as an excellent location for an industrial hub for the Panhandle area.
  
5. Economic Incentives. The Washington County Enterprise Zones (EZ) are located in Chipley, Vernon, and Ebro and are served by all and efficient transportation system. Other incentives are offered to qualified companies as outlined below.
  - a. Jobs Creation Tax Credit. Credit available to corporations only against corporate income tax for wages paid to new zone resident employees (in new fulltime jobs); credit of 30% of wages paid to new EZ resident employees; if 20% or more of permanent fulltime employees are EZ residents, the credit is 45%; credit available for 24 consecutive months with 5-year carry-forward.
  
  - b. Business Machinery and Equipment Sales Tax Refunds. Refunds are possible on sales tax paid on the purchase of new and used qualified depreciable business property with a minimum sales price of \$5,000 per unit; credit of lesser of 97% of sales tax paid or \$10,000 if 20% or more of employees are EZ residents.
  
  - c. Building Materials Sales Tax Refund. Refunds are available to businesses or individuals for sales tax paid on the purchase of building materials used on new construction or to rehabilitate real property located in the EZ. This allows for a credit of 97% of Florida sales and use up to a maximum of \$5,000 or credit of 97% of Florida sales and use tax up to a maximum of \$10,000 if 20% or more of employees are EZ residents.
  
  - d. Property Tax Credit for Jobs Creation. Eligible new, expanded or rebuilt Corporations located only in an EZ can be allowed a credit against Florida Corporate Income Tax equal to 96% of Ad Valorem Taxes Paid. Maximum of \$25,000 annually OR Maximum of \$50,000 annually if 20% or more of Employees are EZ Residents
  
  - e. Electrical Energy Tax Credit of 50% of Municipal Tax Exemption. Exemptions are available to qualified businesses (new, renovated, remodeled, rehabilitated or rebuilt) located in an EZ; exemption of 50% of municipal tax paid for electricity or exemption of 100% of municipal tax paid for electricity, if 20% or more of employees are EZ residents; available for 5 years.

- f. Sales Tax Refund for Jobs Creation. Allows businesses a monthly credit against sales tax wages paid to new, fulltime, EZ resident employees; credit of 30% of wages paid to new zone resident employees or credit of 45% of wages paid to new employees, if 20% or more of employees are EZ; available for 24 months, with no carry-forward.

## Washington County 2000



Source: Florida Department of Labor and Employment Security