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Ocala

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Your Community Connection



New report says Florida is America's fourth most diverse state

Florida scored highly in diversity in birthplace, generation, and marital status, among multiple other factors.

By *Scott Harrell* September 16, 2026 9:14 am





Source: Metro Services | Only California, Texas and New Mexico feature more diversity than Florida, according to a WalletHub study.

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personal finance website WalletHub that put the Sunshine State in the spotlight, but that drought, at least has ended with [a new study](#) that calls Florida the fourth most diverse state in the nation.



To get their findings, the folks at WalletHub looked at diversity in all 50 states across six metrics:

- socio-economic diversity
- cultural diversity
- economic diversity
- household diversity
- religious diversity
- political diversity

The breadth of research across these metrics allowed the study to dig deeper than simple, clear-cut areas of diversity such as ethnicity and gender.

“Race and gender are probably the first things that come to mind when people think about diversity, but there’s plenty more that makes this nation diverse,” said analyst Chip Lupo in an announcement about the study. “The most diverse states have above-average variety when it comes to people’s ages, birthplaces, languages, jobs, family structures and more.”

Some of the areas in which Florida stood out include high birthplace diversity (obviously), generational diversity (again, obvs) and marital-status diversity (it’s complicated); our state didn’t rank below average in any of the criteria, but did sink into average scores for religious and household-size diversity.

The three states that WalletHub found to be more diverse in Florida are, in descending order,

California, Texas, and New Mexico. The least diverse state in the United States? West Virginia, followed by Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Montana.





Scott Harrell

Scott is an award-winning reporter and editor who's covered local news in Florida for two decades. He's written for Creative Loafing Tampa Bay, Spectrum Bay News 9, the Bradenton Herald, RADAR, the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, and REAX Music Magazine, among others. He lives in Summerfield, and can be reached at sharrell@352today.com.

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The Ocala City Council approved a 6.6177 millage rate, an \$18.2 million fire assessment, and raises for City Manager Peter Lee, City Attorney William Sexton, and Police Chief Michael Balken.



By **Jamie Berube** September 15, 2026 10:54 pm
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Source: 352today | Taxpayers will see the same 6.6177 city millage, while City Manager Peter Lee, City Attorney William Sexton, and Police Chief Michael Balken take home higher salaries after a unanimous council vote.

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The special meeting at City Hall was the first of two required Truth in Millage hearings. Budget Director Tammie Haslam told council the proposed citywide operating millage of 6.6177 mills is the same as the one in effect. The rolled-back rate of 6.3727. The city is not raising the millage number; the rolled-back rate is the millage that would raise the same property-tax revenue as last year when applied to this year's



Countryside Development Fund budget of \$856,159. Staff said there's extra levy support to higher, confirms the real matcha, operating costs in the districts. Albuquerque With Good Don't Skip This September Benefit Check Recipe Behind The Weight Senior Discounts Separately, council adopted Resolution 2026-54 reimposing non-ad valorem fire assessments for FY 2026-27. Haslam said the rates use the same structure and methodology as the current year, with an \$18.2 million revenue target. Collection will run under Florida's Uniform Assessment Collection Act. That item also passed without public opposition.

Executive pay in the same budget cycle

The same week the tentative budget cleared, drafts of two-year employment agreements dated September 15, 2026, set new base pay for the city's top appointed officials, effective November 1, 2026, through October 31, 2028. Those contracts were on the Sept. 15 agenda. Combined base salaries for the four posts the city has publicly posted total about \$883,000.

Ocala City Manager Peter A. Lee's proposed base salary is \$267,608, up from \$258,558 when he was last reappointed in 2024, an increase of \$9,050. The city would also contribute 21 percent of salary to a 401(a) plan with Mission Square Retirement (about \$56,200 a year at the new base), pay a \$750 monthly car allowance, provide a city phone, and carry term life insurance equal to salary rounded to even thousands plus \$100,000. Lee would receive any citywide cost-of-living increase given to other employees, plus 20 weeks' severance and three months of administrative leave if terminated without cause. The raise lands as the council is also

scheduled to hear an internal audit of a spring cyber-fraud incident that diverted \$492,056.44 in a vendor payment; after bank recovery and insurance, the city's net loss was reported at \$27,799.81. The auditor's report was submitted to Lee on Sept. 8. Lee said he learned of the missing funds in July, opened investigations, and that the city was the victim of a business email compromise.

City Attorney William Sexton's proposed base is \$255,386, up from \$235,000 in the 2024 cycle, about \$20,386. The city would contribute 20 percent of salary to the same 401(a) plan, pay a \$500 monthly car allowance and a \$200 monthly technology stipend in place of city hardware, and provide comparable life insurance.

Ocala Police Chief Michael T. Balken's proposed base is \$224,349, up from \$216,762, about \$7,587. He would receive a 20 percent 401(a) contribution, a city vehicle with operating costs paid by the city, a phone, and the same life-insurance structure. Unlike Lee and Sexton, Balken's draft also states that he receives citywide cost-of-living increases automatically.

All three drafts keep 20 weeks of cash severance if the official is not reappointed without 90 days' notice or is fired without cause, plus payout of earned PTO and continuation of health coverage for up to 20 weeks. "Cause" is narrowly defined (willful dereliction, certain criminal convictions, material dishonesty, and similar misconduct).

Haslam's presentation tied the larger millage-over-rollback gap to "the addition of critical employees and increasing cost pressures related to salary, benefits, and operating costs." The executive contracts are the most visible piece of that payroll picture. The tentative budget itself does not itemize every employee raise; those sit in department lines inside the \$207.4 million General Fund and the much larger enterprise and pension funds that make up the \$1.27 billion total.

Council voted to approve the final millage, final budget, and the employment agreements at its Tuesday, September 1, 2026 meeting.





Jamie Berube

Jamie Berube is a reporter covering local government, community issues, arts & culture, and human interest stories across Marion County. A recent Summa Cum Laude graduate of the University of Florida (B.S. in Public Relations), she is a passionate storyteller, freelance journalist, and social media consultant dedicated to delivering insightful, trustworthy local journalism and storytelling.

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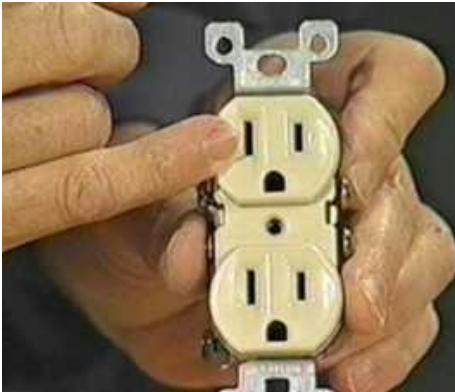
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