



PlanET Community Workshop (Source: Amy Brooks)

East Tennessee Regional Initiatives

★ Partnership for Sustainable Communities—Funded and Preferred Regions

★ THRIVE 2055

Southeast Tennessee Region
HUD Preferred Region Status



Southeast Tennessee Development District is partnering with local governments, businesses, non-profits, and citizens from across the region in THRIVE 2055, a public-private initiative focused on proactively engaging people from across Southeast Tennessee, Northeast Alabama, and Northwest Georgia in creating an action plan for making the most of the region's economic opportunities while preserving what is most loved about these communities. The Tri-State Region comprises 16 counties and 79 municipalities in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama, connected by landscape, watersheds, and local issues and opportunities.

Known for breathtaking natural beauty, bountiful opportunities for outdoor fun and distinct business advantages make the region one of the most desirable in the nation. Through a remarkable sense of community spirit and a process of public-private partnerships, the region's citizens have made their home a hub for successful business enterprise, a regional tourism center, and a gracious place to live. Over the past few years, the THRIVE region has experienced tremendous economic development with the investments of over \$4 billion in new business investment, and the creation of thousands of jobs. Based upon these economic development successes, the region is experiencing a great deal of optimism and is very well positioned for accelerated growth.

These growth pressures not only exacerbate existing environmental, infrastructure, and fiscal challenges and in some instances create new ones. The region's rural areas are struggling with double-digit unemployment and gaps between current workforce skills and the demands of emerging and retooling industries. Local governments are fiscally restrained and challenged to meet the existing infrastructure needs at a time when impending growth is likely to demand new infrastructure and public facilities. While the creation of more jobs is exciting, there is a strong desire within the region to preserve the community identity, quality of life, and other elements of local flavor that have made the area so attractive.

THRIVE 2055 was established and funded by a wide array of businesses, foundations, local governments, and non-profit organizations. The initiative is citizen-led through working groups and a volunteer coordinating committee, assisted by a local project manager, a team of professional staff from partner agencies, and a consulting team. Many of the elected officials are engaged in an advisory role as well as participating in the working groups.

The first year, the "Listen and Learn Phase," encompassed three major steps:

1. Identifying what contributes to the regional vitality based upon multiple input opportunities from residents and workers in the region
2. Analyzing forces and trends shaping the region

3. Gaining an understanding of the region's existing performance in areas such as education, workforce development, economic competitiveness, natural environment, health and wellness, transportation, and infrastructure

As the initiative enters its second year, efforts will focus on visioning and creating possibilities around local values and key issues that will help guide the region into the next 40 years. Developing partnerships and collaborating across county and state lines will help create a competitive region where all citizens have the opportunity to THRIVE.



Plan East Tennessee (PlanET) is a regional partnership of communities and organizations building a shared direction for the future. PlanET seeks ideas to protect the valuable resources and address the region's challenges regarding jobs, education, housing, transportation, a clean environment, and community health. The goal is to create long-term solutions or investments in the region and to define the next chapter of the rich history, leaving a legacy of optimism and opportunity for future generations.

Funded by a HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, PlanET is a three-year process that focused on Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union counties in the Knoxville metropolitan area. PlanET was designed to foster ongoing citizen involvement in planning for the region's future, develop a regional "blueprint" to guide decisionmaking over the next decades, and increase local capacity for dialogue, collaboration, and action.

Using a three-phase engagement process, PlanET leaders hope to produce targeted, meaningful outcomes. Phase I (August 2011-July 2012) brought community members together to establish a shared identity and vision. Phase II (April 2012-March 2013) took that vision and developed a shared direction through a variety of community-engagement activities. The work being accomplished in Phase III (January 2013-December 2013) is producing and reporting the final product and focusing on implementation activities. By the end of 2013, over 10,000 individuals will have contributed to the development of an action plan that lays out strategies and tools for implementation. It is intended to serve as a resource for individual communities and organizations to solve tough issues

together so that they grow and innovate in ways that benefit the entire regional community.

Stretching across five East Tennessee counties, the PlanET region includes a range of communities and terrain. The people and places are rooted in the Appalachian Mountains, and a strong sense of history and an independent nature define the region. The region is small town friendly with big-city amenities. There are productive farms and places where residents can live away from it all, but there are also suburban and urban neighborhoods and one of the nation's strongest research and technology corridors. Home to Tennessee's flagship state university and a number of smaller educational institutions, there are many opportunities for jobs, education, and workforce development in the region's center. There is a wealth of natural and recreational assets, including Norris Lake, the Tennessee River, and part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park that support the region's stellar tourism economy. The low cost of living makes the region more affordable than many other metropolitan areas.

Despite all of the assets, there are challenges to the region's livability. There are economic and social disparities and physical issues relating to growth and development. Many of the residents live in poverty and have limited employment prospects. Many of the streams and lakes are becoming polluted, and poor air quality is affecting the region's health and its environmental assets. And the majority of the region's households are spending large portions of monthly income on transportation—not just because of rising gas prices, but because so many of the homes are located far away from the region's employment and commercial centers.

The region's challenges today will be compounded by the population growth forecast over the next three decades. PlanET was undertaken to address these challenges before they become insurmountable, ensuring that the region remains beautiful, becomes healthier, and offers pathways to success for all. PlanET is designed to develop strategic solutions to region-wide problems by bringing local officials, community and business leaders, and residents together to plan for the region's future. The goal is to improve livability for all who live in the region now and for the next generation of residents and workers.

