

# The Community Survey

**April, 2012**

*PREPARED FOR*

**Plan East Tennessee**

*BY*

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# Introduction

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All communities are faced with making decisions about their future and about how their limited resources can best be utilized. Each community can capitalize on its own strengths and take measures to overcome its challenges. However, decisions made at the community level can have regional impact and can benefit from a regional perspective because of the economic interdependence between communities in today's society. PlanET is a collaboration of local governments, private and non-profit organizations, and individuals in a five-county region in East Tennessee that have joined together to develop a regional plan for the future. Developing a regional plan for the future requires a process that involves a great deal of listening and making concerted efforts to seek input from all residents living in the communities. The goals of this process are to learn the values of the region, the challenges facing the region, the priorities of its residents, and how all can work together for a better future.

The purpose of this study was to seek input from the residents of Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union Counties about what is important in the region and how to best address challenges regarding jobs, housing, transportation, a clean environment, and community health. A telephone survey was conducted to measure attitudes and opinions about what residents value about living in East Tennessee and to learn their perceptions of the challenges and severity of these challenges currently facing their community. Additionally, questions were designed to give participants the opportunity to make preferences regarding funding allocations to address these challenges and to provide input on their priorities for economic development and job creation. The results and findings from the survey are presented in this report.

Other opportunities for participation and input in the regional planning process are available as part of the Plan East Tennessee schedule of activities and communication avenues on-line at [www.planeasttn.org](http://www.planeasttn.org).

## Summary of Findings

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A telephone survey of 2,000 residents in five East Tennessee counties was conducted between February 8, 2012 and March 28, 2012 to measure attitudes and opinions about problems facing the region and priorities for future growth. Interviews were conducted with residents in Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union County.

- Overall, residents in the five-county region feel positive about the quality of life in their community. Three out of four residents in the region, (78.0%), report the quality of life as good or excellent.
- Residents in all five counties indicate the lack of good-paying jobs is a major problem in their community. When presented with a list of potential problems, the lack of good-paying jobs was consistently chosen by survey respondents as the most serious problem facing their community. There is considerable variation across counties regarding the presence and severity of other community problems.
- Availability of high-quality public schools emerges as the most important factor in choosing a new place to live. Less than one in five survey participants, (14.7%), report availability of high-quality schools as not at all important in their decision-making for housing location. Living in a community with a mix of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds or living in a community with a mix of different types of housing were the least important factors in choosing a new residence.
- Access to public transportation within an easy walk and sidewalks are two amenities reported to be in short supply by survey respondents. While there is some difference in opinions across counties, a majority of residents indicate they feel sidewalks and public transportation within an easy walk are lacking in the area they live.
- Providing educational programs for new career opportunities is the preferred strategy for creating new jobs in the region by approximately one third, (32.6%), of the residents. Providing building sites or land to support land growth was the least popular option provided to participants. Manufacturing or science and technology jobs are reported to be the most important type of jobs to attract to the region.
- Spending priorities throughout the five-county region include attracting high quality jobs and improving the transportation system. Preferences for other areas of governmental spending vary across the region.
- Participating community forums and posting ideas online are the most popular methods of participation in the process to determine priorities for future growth in the region. However, approximately one in three survey participants, (32.4%), indicate they never participate in the planning process.

## Methods

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The University of Tennessee's College of Social Work Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE) conducted a telephone survey with 400 residents from Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union Counties for a total of 2,000 East Tennessee residents from the five-county region. The purpose of the survey was to measure residents' attitudes and opinions about the challenges facing their communities and to determine their priorities for the future of the region. Interviews were conducted between February 8, 2012 and March 28, 2012 utilizing a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The sample size for this survey results in a +/- 2.19 margin of error at the 95% confidence interval for regional results and +/- 4.9 margin of error at the 95% confidence interval for results reported at the county level.

A stratified random sample was created so that results could be generalized to each of the five counties as well as to the region as a whole. Independent random samples of telephone landlines were drawn for each county. Telephone exchanges were selected based upon population distribution, and the remaining digits were randomly generated based upon blocks of telephone numbers in use. An address match was conducted to identify addresses associated with the telephone number. An advance letter was mailed to households for which an address match could be made. The purpose of the letter was to introduce the study prior to the telephone invitation to participate in the telephone interview in an effort to improve response rate and reduce non-response bias. A copy of the advance letter may be found in the Appendix to this report. The response rate for the survey was 29.2% using the Response Rate 4 calculations provided by American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), and the cooperation rate was 49.1%.

Telephone interviewing was conducted during day and evening shifts, conducted seven days a week as a further effort to reduce non-response bias. Each telephone number was attempted up to five times until a final disposition could be assigned to the number. Efforts were made to include younger residents by implementing a script that inquired if anyone under the age of 25 and at least 18 years of age lived in the household. If a young adult lived in the household but was not available to complete the interview at that time, a callback was scheduled. Additional efforts were also made to include male participants by asking to speak to the youngest male in the household. If no male was available, the youngest female in the household was interviewed. A cell phone sample was not used for this project due to sampling constraints.

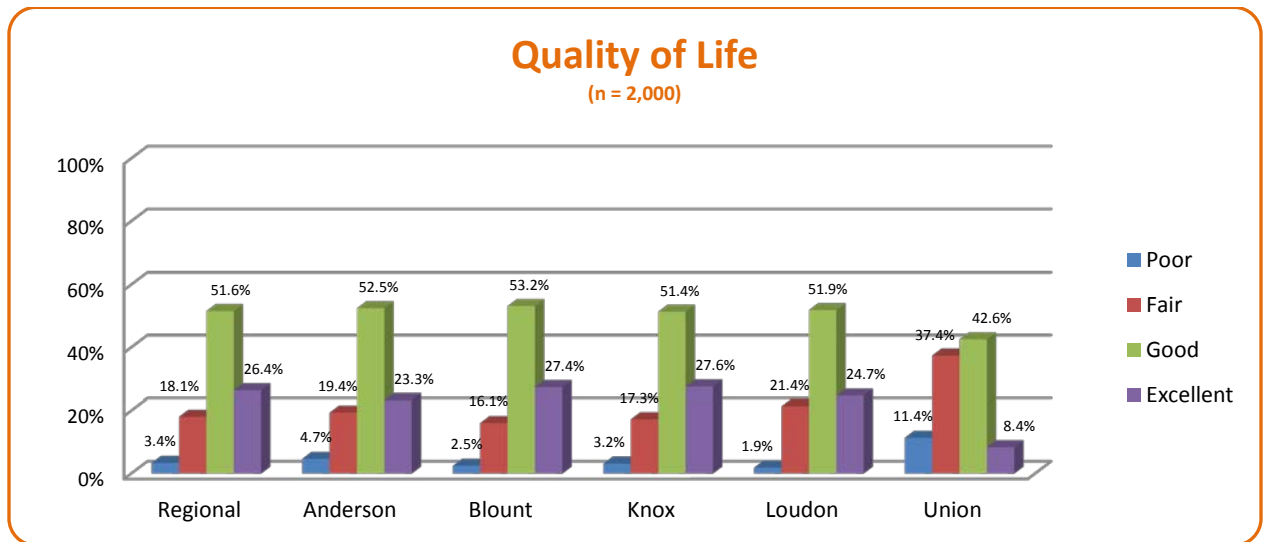
The survey instrument contained several batteries of questions for which the response categories were the same for each question within the battery. In an effort to reduce any bias that might be introduced by question ordering, randomization of questions within each battery was implemented. All questions within each battery were asked in each interview, but the order of the questions being asked varied.

A weight was calculated for each record to adjust for selection bias and non-response bias. A post-stratification weight was assigned to match sample characteristics to population characteristics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006-2010 American Community Survey. Sample characteristics used for calculations of these weights were age and gender. An additional weight was calculated for each record to reflect the current distribution of population within the region. All results reported and discussed in this report are based upon weighted data.

# Results and Discussion

## Quality of Life in East Tennessee

Survey respondents from the five county region were given the opportunity to rate the quality of life in their community. Overall, respondents reported having positive feelings, with approximately three out of four who indicated they felt the quality was either good or excellent. Generally, those who live in a city or town and those who have higher levels of education rate their quality of life as better than those who live in rural areas or who have lower levels of education.



**Figure 1: How would you rate the quality of life in your community?**



Respondents were also provided with an opportunity to express what aspect of living in East Tennessee they valued most. A variety of features were offered, but those most frequently reported were the mountains and natural beauty of the area. Other highly valued aspects of life in East Tennessee were the character of the people and sense of community, the small town feel of the area, as well as the importance of family being nearby. A number of respondents reflected they appreciate being able to live in a smaller community but have easy access to the activities and amenities of a city. There was some variation across counties as to what was valued by respondents, but for the most part there was a great deal of commonality in their expressed sentiments.

*“I value the ease of country living with a spice of city.”*

### **Attracting High Quality Jobs**

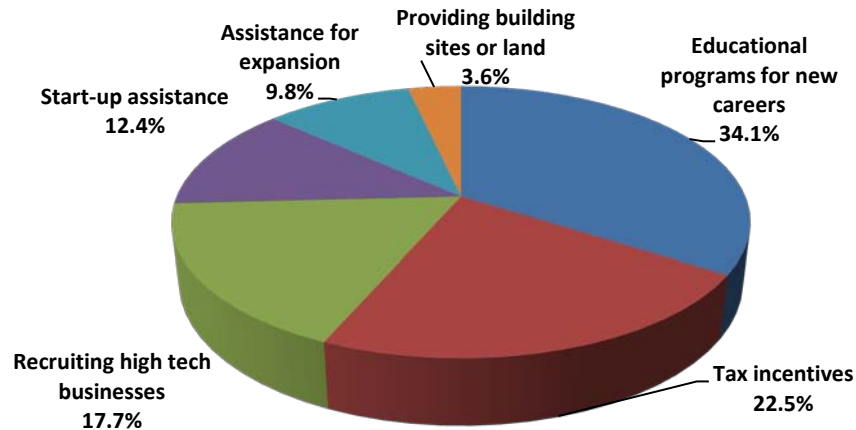
The need for more jobs and the desire for government to attract high-paying jobs into the area emerged as a top priority for the residents of East Tennessee. Among 17 common problems facing communities, survey respondents consistently reported the lack of good-paying jobs as the most serious problem facing their community. The severity of the problem varied, however, between the five counties, with 47.2% of respondents from Knox County indicating the lack of good jobs as a major problem, while 84.8% of those from Union County reported it as a major problem in their community. The recognition that more and better jobs are needed was also reflected in responses to the open-end question of what would make life better in your community. Again, the addition of jobs and the attraction of new businesses to the area were the most frequently provided suggestions for improving life in the community.

*Attracting high quality jobs and providing educational opportunities to provide new career opportunities are high priorities for residents in the five-county region.*

The desire for government to attract high-quality jobs to the region continued to be expressed by respondents as they developed spending priorities for their local government. When given the opportunity to make budgetary allocations of additional funds to five spending areas, attracting high-quality jobs received 29.4 cents, almost one-third of each additional dollar. Those with graduate degrees designated this area as a slightly higher priority by allocating 36.5 cents of each dollar for job development. Regionally, manufacturing jobs are the preferred type of jobs to attract; however, respondents from Knox County indicated that science and technology jobs were slightly more important than manufacturing jobs. Government jobs were ranked last in importance for the type of jobs to attract.

Providing educational programs for new career opportunities was reported to be the most important method for creating new jobs from a list of six strategies. The least important

strategy for job development, according to survey respondents, was to provide land and building sites to employers.



**Figure 2: Most Important Strategy for Creating New Jobs**  
 (n = 2,000)

Providing educational opportunities was the most preferred strategy for creating new jobs, whereas providing land and building sites was the least preferred strategy, regardless of which county in which respondents lived. However, there was some variation in rankings for the four remaining strategies between the five counties in the region.

### Improving the Transportation System

One of the attractions of living in the East Tennessee region is the ability to live in a smaller community and to have access to the amenities offered by a city. These values were reflected in suggestions made by survey respondents for making life better in East Tennessee. Improving the transportation system to reduce traffic congestion and improving the condition of the roads emerged as the second most frequently offered suggestion for improving life in the region. One in 10 respondents stated that improvements in this area would make life better in their community.

Recognition of needed improvements to the transportation system was also demonstrated by the rankings in the severity of common community problems. Three of the 17 common problems that respondents were asked to consider when choosing the most serious problems facing their

*Improving the transportation system to reduce traffic congestion and repairing roads would make life better for one in 10 respondents.*

community addressed transportation issues. If traffic congestion, roads and highways in need of repair, and lack of public transportation are combined, the transportation system in its present

form is the second most serious problem facing the region. As a further indicator that improvement to the transportation system is desired, the budget-allocation exercise completed by survey respondents resulted in this area receiving the second highest level of funding. For every additional dollar received by local government, respondents indicated that 22.2 cents should be used to improve the transportation system. Those who live in Anderson County felt a slightly lower level of funding should be given to this area, but those in Union County felt this was the highest spending priority of the five areas provided.

The use of public transportation is one method for reducing traffic congestion, but residents in the East Tennessee region report this service is lacking in the area. More than half of all respondents, (64.5%), indicated that there is too little public transportation within an easy walk of their present home. There was wide variation in the perception of availability between counties. Approximately half, (56.4%), of those in Knox County reported there was too little public transportation within an easy walk, while more than 8 out of 10, (84.1%), in Union County reported the same perception.

### **Quality Healthcare**

Rising costs and availability of quality healthcare are factors that may affect the quality of life within a community. Concern about the need to reduce the cost of healthcare appears to be a mid-range concern as reflected in the budgetary priorities of survey respondents. Funding to reduce these costs constituted 19.9 cents of every additional dollar allocated, according to respondents' input, thereby ranking third in budgetary preferences for the region.

A lack of quality healthcare was not seen as a serious problem in the region as a whole, but four out of 10 respondents from Union County, (40.1%), reported it as a major problem in their community. Furthermore, when asked which problem was the most serious facing their community, lack of quality healthcare emerged as the fourth most serious problem for those who reside in Union County. Those who live in the other counties did not report lack of quality healthcare being as serious of a problem for their communities.

### **Air and Water Quality**

The presence of rivers and lakes is an important feature of living in East Tennessee, and it provides residents with valued recreational activities. Pollution in these rivers and lakes was reported by respondents to be the third most serious problem facing the community. Air pollution and poor water quality, on the other hand, are not considered to be as serious in the region as a whole; however, there was considerable variation in perceptions of their severity across counties. Air pollution was reported as the least serious problem facing the community by those who live in Union County, but was the third most serious problem reported by those who live in Loudon County. Perceptions regarding the severity of poor water quality showed the same variability across counties. Those who live in Blount County ranked poor water quality 15<sup>th</sup> out of 17 as the most severe problem, but those who live in Union County ranked this problem as the fifth most serious problem.

Spending priorities to improve the quality of air and water was not a high priority for respondents. Budget allocations for this area of improvement were half of that allocated for attracting high quality jobs to the area. Of each dollar, 15.2 cents was earmarked for improving air and water quality.

### Housing Choices and Affordability

Availability of affordable housing and the presence of desired features within the area in which one lives can impact the perception of quality of life. It has been noted in research conducted by realtors associations and housing experts that the decision-making process for choosing a new home may be changing. In order to determine what features would be important to residents in the East Tennessee region if they were choosing a new home, respondents were read a list of nine features and asked to indicate how important each would be in a choosing a new home. The presence of high-quality schools was the most important factor to the respondents, while diversity in racial categories, types of housing, and age groups were the least important. Being within a 30-minute commute to work and the presence of sidewalks were second and third on the list of preferred features. There is little variation across counties, age groups, or educational levels in the factors used in choosing a new home.

*Presence of high-quality schools is reported to be the most important factor in choosing a new home.*

A lack of affordable housing is not reported to be a serious problem in the region. Less than 5% of the respondents indicated this to be the most serious problem in their community. When given the opportunity to set budgetary priorities, the lowest priority was given to increasing housing choices at an affordable price, with 13.9 cents out of each dollar dedicated to this area. This priority is consistent across counties and for all groups.

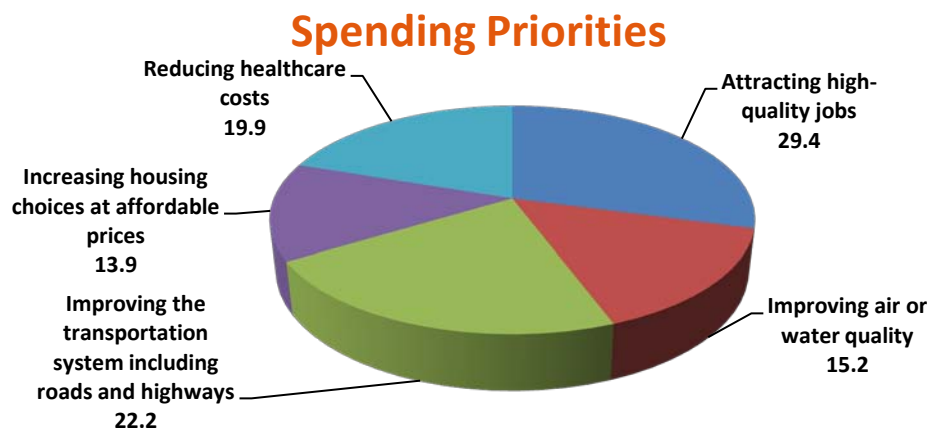


Figure 3: Budget allocations in cents (n = 2,000)

### Preferred Methods for Participation

Community involvement is a key ingredient of PlanET, and community leaders are interested in learning the best strategies for increasing participation in the process. In order to develop these strategies it is important to know the preferred means of participation. A number of methods for participating in the planning process for future growth were read, and more than one method could be chosen. Almost one in three (32.4%) of the respondents indicated they never participate in the planning process; posting ideas online was the most preferred method for those who felt they would participate in the future. Males were more likely than females to indicate that attending a community forum or meeting would be a method for them to participate; 25.7% of males chose this method, while only 17.3% of females chose this same method.

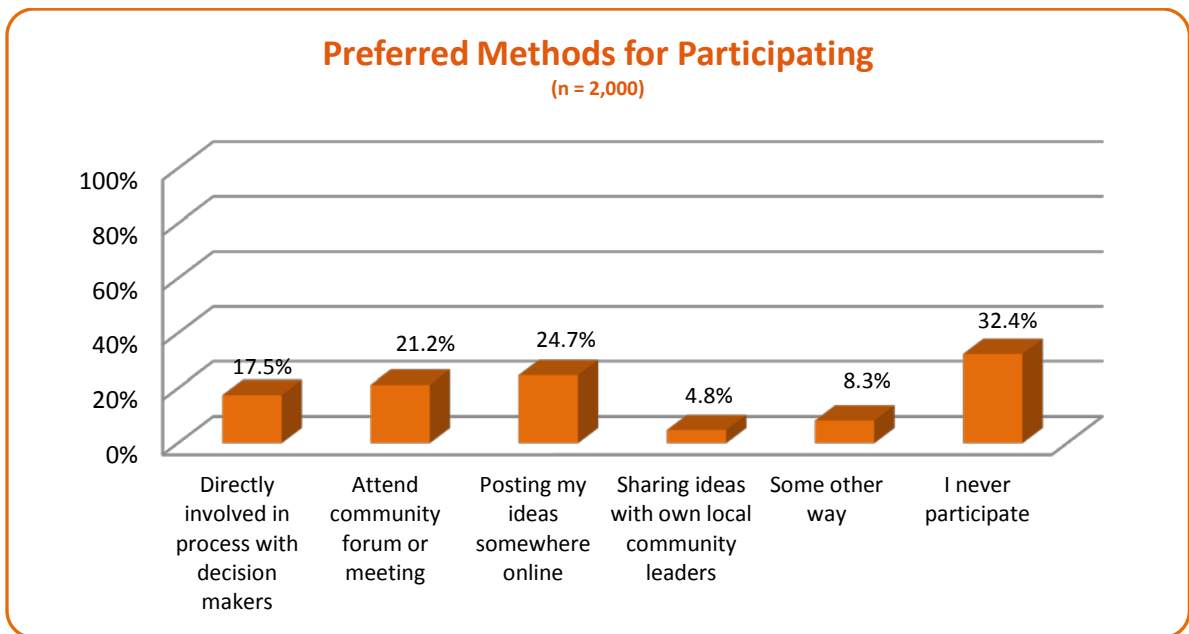


Figure 4: What ways of participating in the planning process would be most attractive to you?

## Conclusion

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Residents of East Tennessee reported having positive feelings about living in East Tennessee and gave high marks for their quality of life. The beauty of the mountains and surrounding nature are highly valued by respondents as well as the friendliness and hospitality shown by people who live around them. The slower pace of life and the sense of community are also very important to those who live in the region. However, residents also recognized that there are challenges to be met in order to maintain this high quality of life.

One of the most serious challenges facing the region, according to survey respondents, is the lack of high-paying jobs. Efforts to attract high-quality jobs, such as manufacturing or science and technology jobs, may require additional training or workforce development. Providing the appropriate educational opportunities to train the workforce that will enable workers to secure these types of jobs was reported to be the highest priority for recruiting high quality jobs to the area.

Another challenge identified by the respondents was traffic congestion and the need for road improvements. This challenge may be exacerbated by features of life that were reported to be highly valued by respondents. The ability to live in a smaller community but to still have access to the culture and activities available in a larger city was a feature frequently given as one that is greatly appreciated. Additionally, living within a 30-minute commute to work was an important factor in choosing a new place to live. Accessibility to the amenities offered by a city, as well as a willingness to make a 30-minute commute on a daily basis, may result in increased traffic congestion. As a possible alternative, public transportation was seen as lacking.

Spending priorities reported by the respondents matched these overarching concerns. Attracting high quality jobs and improving the transportation system were given the highest priorities for allocating additional funds. This consistency between identification of improvements needed in the region and spending priorities will help to facilitate the planning process for the future. Striving to find the right balance between addressing these needs and maintaining the qualities of life that are valued by its residents provides a challenge in mapping the future course for the communities involved and the region as a whole.

# Appendix

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