Report cites progress on obesity, air quality, but challenge on aging population

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A clearer view of the Smoky Mountains from less air pollution gets East Tennessee some high marks on a sort of regional report card to be released next week.

A drop in childhood obesity is also a plus; then there are issues including a general aging of the East Tennessee population that will present challenges from health care to housing.

These and other topics will be examined when ETIndex releases its Livability Report Card at 10:15 a.m. Friday, March 6, at the Knoxville Chamber, 17 Market St.

The report card, an outgrowth of the PlanET effort, looks at the region's strengths and weaknesses in terms of clean air and water, healthy people, regional prosperity, local food production, transportation choices, efficient infrastructure, great places and housing choices, said Amy Brooks, Metropolitan Planning Commission planner in charge of the PlanET effort.

The report card is put together from data collected for ETIndex, which is a database assembled to serve the eight-county East Tennessee region taking part in PlanET, said Jeff Welch, interim executive director of MPC. Formed in 2011, PlanET is a partnership between Knox, Anderson, Blount, Loudon, Jefferson, Monroe, Roane and Union Counties to develop and implement a vision for those communities.

The report card and the ETIndex website are meant to work hand-in-glove, Welch said.

"The report card, which changes from one year to the next, has key indicators and then the website has the background data, the nuts and bolts data that you can use," he said. "Nonprofits can easily access this information to pull together grants, and cities and foundations can really utilize this data to help them apply for funds."
Both are ways for people who took part in the PlanET visioning process to keep tabs on data that will tell them if the vision is being achieved, Brooks said.

Air quality improves

"One of the major issues that came up was around clean air and clean water; we are able to look at the number of unhealthy air days and know that those are declining," she said.

"We haven't had an unhealthy air day since July 7, 2012," said Tim Kuhn, geographic information systems manager with MPC.

Aside from obvious health benefits, this can have an economic impact, as the information can be used to market the region, he said.

"At the start of the decade, the story was that only 50 percent of the days had good air quality. That number has climbed to where close to 90 percent of the days have good air quality," Kuhn said.

East Tennessee is meeting or exceeding federal air quality standards now, Welch said. This is largely because of tighter federal emissions standards on vehicle fleets, he said.

"But the big part is all that TVA has done over the last 10 to 15 years, adding scrubbers to their power plants and converting plants to natural gas," Welch said.

Childhood obesity declines

Another positive trend noted in the livability report is that childhood obesity is on the decline, Brooks said. Based on information compiled from government surveys, the number of children in the region who are obese has decreased from 42 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2013.

With the South noted for its problem with obesity, it is encouraging to see data that the childhood obesity seems to be reversing in East Tennessee, Brooks said.

While it has welcome news on air quality and obesity, the livability report points out an area where some attention will need to be focused, Brooks said.
"Our demographics are shifting," she said. "One in six people today are 65 and over, but by 2040, it will be one in four."

Senior population grows

Seniors are the fastest-growing segment of the population, Kuhn said, increasing 32 percent between 2000 and 2004.

"When you start to look at that, you start to think what kind of policies will we need to be looking at over the next five or 10 years — the levels and types of services we will need to provide. From transportation, to health care, to work, to food, to housing, it's just huge," Welch said.

"And that is really what we are trying to do with this index, provide indicators of what kinds of issues we are going to have to deal with in this region based on the trends we see now," he said.

The ETIndex database is not meant to be a marketing tool, but can lend itself well to that, Kuhn said. Data showing the improvement in air quality over the last decade could be used to support a campaign to attract businesses and tourists to East Tennessee, he said.

"Being able to see the mountains on a daily basis is a really important part of the appeal of our community, Kuhn said.

Data used for ETIndex is already available through a variety of public sources, such as federal and state agencies and universities but has been compiled in one site meant to make accessing and working with the data easier, Kuhn said. The ETIndex site tracks 78 indicators, offering an analysis, chart tracking the trend, data tables and maps. Data is available at the regional, county and often the city level. The data can be downloaded into other programs.

"You can use whatever programs you want to customize the data, do your own charts or analysis," Kuhn said.

The Livability Report Card will be available on the ETIndex.org website beginning Friday.
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