The median age of people in Knox and surrounding counties is on the rise, and that will mean increased needs the community will have to meet, say the producers of a livability report to be released next week.

The Livability Report Card, which looks at the region on a range of issues from air quality to housing, will be released March 6 at the Knoxville Chamber. An outgrowth of the PlanET partnership of counties promoting a vision for East Tennessee, the report was prepared by the Metropolitan Planning Commission and will be on the ETIndex.org website.

One finding of the report, which relies on data gathered from a host of federal and state agencies, is that one in six people in East Tennessee today is age 65 or over, and that figure will climb to one in four by 2040. Jeff Welch, MPC interim executive director, says this will have implications from housing to transportation to health care.

"It's just huge," he said.

Susan Long, director of the Knoxville-Knox County Community Actions Committee's Office on Aging, agrees.

"Especially transportation," she said. "Almost everywhere we go, when you ask a group of seniors what they think their greatest need is, it is accessible transportation."

By this, they mean a bus or some vehicle that will come to their door or close by, that is accessible and does not have a confusing route or schedule, Long said. The second greatest need to transportation is probably housing, she said. That means homes that are affordable, accessible and easy to maintain.

Seniors want things within close walking distance, and want services that can come to them, Long said.
"A mobile grocery store would be a good thing, with good, fresh, low-cost food, that might come to your neighborhood or to your door," she said.

 Asked about the growing needs of the senior population, Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett said government should stand back and let the free market meet the demands of seniors. The only government role should be in providing infrastructure for business and transportation.

 "To say ‘we need to build more senior centers now, and get ahead of that,’— that's not the reality of where we're at," Burchett said. "I do think the market will decide."

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