Editorial: Communities should prepare for senior surge

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A report card on livability in East Tennessee will be released Friday, but one notable finding already has been made public: The area's population will grow significantly older in the coming years, placing more demands on senior services.

Knox and surrounding counties should plan ahead for this demographic development so that the region's quality of life will not suffer.

The ETIndex Livability Report Card, an outgrowth of the PlanET project, looks at the region's strengths and weaknesses using data collected from Knox, Anderson, Blount, Loudon, Jefferson, Monroe, Roane and Union counties. The Metropolitan Planning Commission is coordinating the PlanET effort.

The report card delves into numerous components of life in East Tennessee, including air quality, health, prosperity, food production, transportation, infrastructure and housing. The aging baby boomer generation will have a significant effect on services for seniors provided by the public and private sectors.

While most of the public discussion of the growing senior population centers, appropriately enough, on the long-term viability of Social Security and Medicare, the ramifications on the local level are huge as well.

Currently, one in six East Tennesseans is age 65 or older; by 2040, one in four will be seniors. That is higher than the nationwide estimate of one in five.

Housing and transportation will take on greater significance. Susan Long, director of the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee's Office on Aging, told the News Sentinel that accessible transportation and affordable housing are of paramount importance to seniors.
Communities will need to encourage mixed-use developments where residences and businesses coexist within walking distance. Transportation — whether by public transit, nonprofits or religious organizations — will have to be a factor in public policy decisions, from zoning to road construction projects to the construction of senior centers. Seniors living in rural areas where transportation options are limited could face greater challenges.

There likely will be changes in the private sector, too. More people in the region will be living on fixed incomes, and poverty is an ever-present concern for seniors. Seniors tend to spend less, which will affect businesses and have a ripple effect on state and local tax revenues — a serious concern for Tennessee and its communities, given the heavy dependence on sales tax revenues to fund government services.

Health care providers will have to adjust. The surge will increase demand for health care professionals who specialize in geriatric services, and more resources will have to go toward treating chronic diseases such as heart disease and osteoporosis. Home health care, assisted living facilities, nursing homes and hospice care should be in ever greater demand.

East Tennessee communities will be richer for the expanding population of seniors, whose wisdom and experience are invaluable to society. Cities and counties need to prepare now to promote a prosperous life for the growing number of residents in their golden years.