High-quality local school facilities and K-12 education programs
- Needs to be a focus on STEM education for K-12 and beyond
- Better high school education (more schools, more challenging courses)
- Stop passing on kids that are not meeting competency standards
- Need to support funding for schools; view schools as investments
- Excellence in schools attracts excellence in economic development

A variety of post-secondary education and job training opportunities
- Everyone should have an education beyond high school in order to qualify for good jobs
- More educational opportunities in the trades for those not bound for college; more vocational training to ensure transferable skills
- Continue the trend in offering more community colleges and easier access to education
- Education will be more electronically available

A fit between the skills of the workforce and the type of businesses the region wants to attract
- Educational programs in community colleges to train for industries we want to attract
- An educated workforce . . . [with] technology skills and a sync between education and available jobs
- Global companies locate [here] because they are attracted to the region's educational system
- Identify future skill sets required and provide training for the next generation

A diverse regional economy
- More diverse employment options: region is too reliant on ORNL and UT
- A regional economy . . . with a strong and diverse local basis, including local farming, local entrepreneurial leadership
- More medical, technology, and engineering jobs; need more tech jobs to replace potential loss of manufacturing jobs
- More tourist attractions to bring jobs to our communities
- More small businesses; increase business incubators throughout the region and support entrepreneurial opportunities

Higher-quality jobs
- Recruit businesses that pay higher wages
- Job opportunities that provide a living wage
- Proximity to amenities like the airport, ORNL, Smokies . . . make [the region] attractive to high tech industries

A more “business friendly” environment
- Government regulations . . . should not be an impediment to production
- Allow the free market to develop the local economy through limited government regulations
- Keep all types of taxes low
- Less reliance on government assistance

The bolded items below are themes derived from priority items identified at the Forum 2 meetings and the two Youth Forum meetings (April 23-28, 2012). Italicized items below each theme are actual participant comments and are included to illustrate different facets of a theme. Some of these comments are vision ideas; others are ways in which existing conditions could be improved.
More transportation options and freedom to choose among these options

- More alternatives for transportation than just the automobile
- Improved public transportation from rural areas to hospitals and health care and increased transportation services for seniors who cannot drive
- Options . . . include more sidewalks that make it easier to get to a bus
- More trains used for goods; reduce truck traffic on roads by increasing the use of rail and barges
- Alternative transportation [is not] at the expense of . . . our freedom to choose our transportation

Improved connectivity between neighborhoods, community services, and recreation options and to areas outside the region

- More greenways that are interconnected to others in the region
- Connectivity of parks and recreation spaces with greenways and pedestrian and biking facilities/opportunities
- More access to . . . sidewalks to schools, to transit, and to shopping
- A train to take workers to Chattanooga, Atlanta, or [other major destinations]

Lower transportation costs

- Transportation system not dependent on fossil fuels
- Cars are still the main way of getting around, but they hopefully are more efficient
- Employment opportunities where people live
- Need for a variety . . . of affordable energy [sources]

Quality infrastructure that serves existing communities and is coordinated with growth

- Transportation network across the region . . . keeps up with traffic demands
- Maintain infrastructure to support rural communities
- Bike lanes being built into new roads
- Retrofitting existing neighborhoods with sidewalks and creating sidewalks in new neighborhoods
- Well thought-out infrastructure to support future growth and development
More housing options that protect the distinct character of urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods

- More housing choices with respect to location and quality
- More housing choices for people in different income brackets—especially in the middle
- Housing that . . . allow[s] people to age in place and continue living if disabled
- More single-family housing in rural areas; areas to live in with lots of land and rural character
- Offer mixed-use housing with blended neighborhoods, including increased housing support designed for seniors
- Freedom of choice to live where you want

More integrated, walkable communities in which people can choose to live

- More connected communities (schools, jobs, housing)
- Healthy, livable neighborhoods with residential and commercial services
- More town centers to facilitate walkable communities
- Neighborhoods with sidewalks and nearby trails for walking/hiking/biking

More affordable housing

- I want my children and grandchildren to be able to live . . . where they want in what they can afford
- Need for accessible and affordable housing for middle-income people
- Increase affordable housing (don’t neglect the lower-income population . . .)
- Affordable housing options integrated in all regions

Good access to health care

- Resolve [regional] disparities in access to good, quality health care
- Better access to health care with lower cost
- Be able to age in place without a car, but have access to services
- We need to look ahead and make sure that we get ahead of the curve for the coming demand . . . regarding the healthcare system

More recreational facilities and opportunities to exercise

- More (inexpensive) recreational/healthy activity opportunities
- Opportunities/activities for middle- and high-schoolers (after school)
- Recreational facilities available to all areas and communities; have parks centrally located to all communities
- Improve and increase the greenway system; need more opportunities to walk . . . to be healthier

More healthy food options

- More healthy lifestyle choices (restaurants, grocery stores, etc.) within a better built environment
- Promote healthy, local foods within the educational system
- Less reliance on imported food; stronger local farming

Lower rates of drug abuse

- Improved policing of the drug problem (especially meth)
- Less reliance on prescription drugs
- A drug-free community
Improved air and water quality as a result of public and private efforts

- Water and air quality need continued improvement; recruit “clean” industries to the region
- Improve air quality for outdoor recreation
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions; reduce car use or [use] lower emission vehicles
- Decrease the amount of impaired streams
- Clean up streams and waterways (rivers and lakes included): stream buffers, reduce erosion, remove bacteria
- Keep private party innovations involved in solutions

Productive farmland

- Agricultural land is seen as a resource to protect and use, not a nuisance
- Protect agricultural land from development
- Attract a new generation of workers interested in farming

Resource protection that provides economic, health, and recreational benefits

- People will appreciate our region’s beauty and take better care of the environment
- Natural resources bring people into the area, bring tourism growth for the region
- Ensure that we protect the rural areas that attract people to the region
- Legacy of parks and natural areas that are destinations will be provided for the next generation
- Preserve enjoyment of access to mountains, camping (public parks)
- Recreational opportunities . . . promote health

Differing Opinions

One of the most notable outcomes of the Regional Forum Series 1 and 2 meetings has been the fact that participants generally agree on the region’s strengths, issues, and challenges. However, a range of different opinions on how to address the region’s issues has been expressed.

Major areas of difference include:

- The role of government and market forces in shaping the region’s future, including concerns about freedom of choice, regulation, and property rights
- The need for planning, especially on a regional scale
- The need for interjurisdictional cooperation