



**LAND USE AND
TRANSPORTATION PLANNING
IN THE CUMBERLAND
REGION OF MIDDLE
TENNESSEE**

A CLINIC ON REGIONAL COLLABORATION

A REPORT IN PROGRESS

**Prepared By The
Lincoln Institute of Land Policy**

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METHODOLOGY

Each year, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (LILP), partnering with the Public Policy Research Institute at the University of Montana, solicits proposals from communities across the country seeking help with regional land use issues. Cumberland Region Tomorrow’s proposal was one of two selected for 2006. LILP then provides a free initial consultation and follow-up clinic. In this case, LILP came to the Cumberland region of Middle Tennessee to assess the situation by visiting with people interested in land use and transportation planning. We also researched materials on past and current planning efforts.

On March 28-30, 2006, we interviewed nearly 30 people representing a cross section of the region’s government, planning, development, conservation, and educational sectors. We followed up with phone interviews with another half dozen people (see Appendix A for a list of interviewees). Each interview was framed around 11 questions about regional land use and transportation (see Appendix B for a list of the questions).

LILP seeks to inform and invigorate land policy through research, education, and outreach programs. It does not advocate a particular point of view, but rather serves as an impartial facilitator and advisor for all interests engaged in regional collaboration.

This report summarizes what we heard. It is not an exhaustive study, nor an end in itself. Some interests and opinions may not be represented here. We are reporting what people said, and some factual inaccuracies may be present. Think of this report as a starting point for further conversations about planning and regional collaboration in the Cumberland Region of Middle Tennessee.

FINDINGS - A REGION IN TRANSITION

The people we talked with agreed that the Cumberland Region of Middle Tennessee retains many assets that give it a high quality of life compared to other metro regions around the country. People lauded the region’s temperate climate, scenic open space, relatively inexpensive land, reliable water supplies, well-educated workforce, diverse economy, and outstanding social and cultural amenities. These same assets that make the area so livable are fueling rapid growth and development. People say they want the economic growth and diversification—they’re happy to live in a prosperous place. But many of the changes that come with growth threaten the very qualities that draw people to the region. Some people sense that the region is at a tipping point—about to rush into an uncertain future, while clinging to an idealized and outmoded past.

The people we talked with are most concerned about traffic congestion, air pollution, loss of open space and farmland to low-density sprawl, over-reliance on the automobile, impacts to surface and

groundwater quality and supply, a scarcity of affordable housing, inequity of services for rural vs. urban taxpayers, and disappearing plant and wildlife communities. Current trends, they said, will lead to ever greater socio-economic and environmental problems. They want to protect the area's quality of life so local communities and economies can continue to grow and prosper. The common refrain we heard during our interviews was, "We don't want to become the next Atlanta, but unless we plan for a different future, we're headed that way."

Everyone agrees that some sort of regional planning effort would be a good approach, but views are less clear about how to develop and implement such a plan. It must be flexible to allow for local differences, but with teeth to hold counties and towns to a common vision. Many people question how a single plan can be accepted and implemented among so many jurisdictions. Would its provisions be advisory or binding? Would compliance be encouraged through voluntary incentives or enforced through regulations? Who would monitor compliance?

Existing Regional Capacity

In many respects, the counties and communities of Middle Tennessee are ahead of the curve when it comes to thinking and acting like a region. People acknowledge a sense of **regional identity**, some of which is derived from proximity to Nashville, and some of which comes from what Middle Tennessee is *not* (not Appalachia, not Memphis, not Deep South, not Mid-Atlantic, not Mid-West, etc.). Nashville is recognized not just as Music City, but as a regional center for commerce (including Nissan, Saturn, Dell, and other major corporations), politics (state capitol), education (including Tennessee State, Fisk, and Vanderbilt), medicine, and culture (including music venues, museums, libraries, and professional sports). The region is also an important transportation hub for the state,

with an international airport and the convergence of three interstate highways. The sum of these features gives residents a sense of belonging to a well-rounded, vibrant, and cohesive regional culture.

Also, a **substantial regional planning infrastructure** already exists in the form of the Greater Nashville Regional Council (created in 1967), the Regional Transportation Authority (1988), Cumberland Region Tomorrow (2000), Nashville Metropolitan Planning Organization (1960s), Leadership Middle Tennessee (1999), Middle Tennessee State University Chair in Urban and Regional Planning (1997), and Partnership 2010 (1996). Over the years, these organizations have partnered with local and state agencies, businesses, other non-governmental organizations, and local citizens to **convene regional planning summits; develop long-range regional land use, transportation, economic development, and housing plans and quality growth policies** (including a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy/Regional Capital Improvements Program); **conduct regional visioning; and draft alternative development scenarios**. More recently, Cumberland Region Tomorrow and a team of regional leaders engaged a cross section of planning officials and citizens to develop a **Quality Growth Toolbox and Quality Growth Principles** (see Appendix C).

Together, these organizations and their initiatives demonstrate a substantial commitment to regional action. They also reveal a well-rounded sense of what "quality of life" means—supporting economic growth and prosperity *and* preserving a healthy natural and human environment. These efforts deserve recognition and are cause for celebration. Nevertheless, everyone we interviewed spoke of the need to build on past success, try new ideas and fresh thinking, revitalize the existing regional framework, and

engage more people and resources to address growth-related issues.

Defining the Region

The people we talked with generally agreed that the boundaries of the region shift depending on the issue at hand and the underlying interests of whoever is drawing the regional map. In other words, the scale of the region may vary depending on the specific “problem shed” under discussion. Several people cited specific issues or infrastructure concerns that lend themselves to action across boundaries, such as air pollution, energy demands, and discrepancies in water supply, sewer, and road standards from one county to the next. Other people took a more geopolitical approach. Some suggested starting small, with Nashville as the core, and building on successes to work outward. Others said the process should include outlying counties and communities from the start. Specifically, people said that the region could be defined by:

- The Cumberland River watershed.
- The air shed.
- The greater Nashville commute shed.
- The greater Nashville job and economic markets.
- The MPO’s 5 counties.
- CRT’s 10 counties.
- GNRC’s 13 counties.

Barriers to Regional Collaboration

Most people recognize that the communities of Middle Tennessee are interdependent, sharing natural resources, job and consumer markets, and cultural qualities. But political boundaries and the current tax structure (a reliance on sales and property taxes) tend to foster competition, not cooperation. Counties and towns fight each other to win business development (and the increased tax base) and infrastructure improvements (e.g., Hwy 109 vs. Hwy 840). Even when counties do cooperate, there’s no mechanism to “share the

wealth.” For example, when a company locates in County A, but all the workers live in County B (where they can afford housing), County A gets the revenue while County B sees higher infrastructure and service costs.

The structure of county governance (a surplus of small jurisdictions, county executives with little to no authority over separate department budgets, and the subsequent power of the purse strings) creates further disincentives for cooperation. The four-year election cycle (and the tendency to oust incumbents after one or two terms) regularly unravels the network of decision makers and disrupts any chance for continuity or long-range vision. Several people applauded CRT’s work to draft a regional vision, but said the vision isn’t clear and is not well understood or supported by the public at large. **In short, there is no clear, organized, popular constituency for regionalism.**

People said that developers are the biggest influence on growth patterns. Development occurs where (mostly short-range) market forces say it should, not guided by a long-range, well-planned vision. Some developers do an excellent job of incorporating quality growth principles in their projects, and others are beginning to see that this approach is profitable and more sustainable. It may be difficult, however, to wean some people away from large-lot development because it’s familiar, and because some people benefit significantly from it.

Several people said that, for all the time and money that have been put into regional planning, the results are often disappointing. They pointed to increasing traffic congestion and air pollution, spreading low-density development, and loss of farmland and greenspace as evidence that current efforts are not keeping pace with growing challenges. Some said that existing regional programs have grown stale and need to be revitalized. Others said that regional initiatives tend to

emphasize innovation, rather than follow-through or sustained success.

Other perceived barriers include:

- Unclear planning roles among GNRC, RTA, MPO, and RPO.
- Metro (Nashville-Davidson County) often seen as “big brother” rather than partner.
- Lack of leadership with vision and clout.
- Lack of civic interest, media interest, and public participation in complex planning issues.
- No perceived looming crisis—the threat is seen more as a gradual erosion of quality of life and environment.
- Difficulty in translating regional planning into local implementation.
- Competing notions of what “good” or “desirable” is.
- Not In My Backyard issues (affordable housing, high-density development, etc.).
- Concerns that planning and regionalism will intrude on private property rights and act as a brake on economic growth.
- Lack of funding (no state income tax, no pool of money that can be easily shared across county lines).

Information Assets and Needs

Assets

People said that agencies and organizations within the region boast a wealth of certain kinds of information, including:

- aerial photographic maps
- water and utility maps
- GIS data
- census data
- county growth plans
- ground transportation plans
- zoning maps

Needs

Other forms of information are missing, or need to be made available in different formats or scales.

- Better trend analysis—depict growth, land use, and transportation changes over time.

- Clearer regional vision statement.
- More information about regionalism—how it works, who does what, what models have succeeded elsewhere.
- Standardized format and language for planning policies and codes across counties.
- Better understanding of conservation tools—easements, purchases-of-development-rights, greenspace policies, etc.
- Better communication among counties on growth trends, planning efforts, problems, and successes.
- A central clearinghouse for existing data, formatted so it is easy to understand and usable at the regional scale.
- Short, medium, and long-term growth and development forecasts.

Who Should Participate?

Almost everyone said that any planning process should be as inclusive as possible. Specifically, people said participants should include:

- Leadership Middle Tennessee
- Tennessee Dept. of Transportation
- Nashville Municipal Planning Organization
- Rural Planning Organization
- Tennessee Valley Authority
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Non-governmental organizations, especially environmental groups
- Realtors and developers
- Nissan
- Cumberland Region Tomorrow’s client list
- Tennessee Land Trust
- American Farmland Trust
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Watershed movement leaders
- County Health Network
- State legislators
- City and county elected officials
- City and county planners
- Agricultural representatives
- At-large citizens

- Tennessee Dept. of Environment and Conservation
- Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development
- Development districts
- Outside planning experts
- Contractors
- Academic community
- The Nature Conservancy
- Forest Legacy Program
- Paper companies
- Chambers of Commerce
- Partnership 2010
- Water/wastewater planners
- Respected individuals, including Steve Turner, Ralph Schulz (Adv. Science Center), Bob Fisher (Belmont Univ.), Bob Martin (Franklin County), and Governor Bredesen

Who Should Lead or Coordinate?

Many people voiced concern over a lack of leadership. People see this void occurring at various levels, from the state down to counties and local communities. Many people said the structure of government (especially at the county level) too often casts elected officials in the role of figurehead rather than decision maker. Leaders cannot then affect change or improve the function of their own government. Others said that leaders have few incentives to plan proactively for the long term or to take risks. This results in reactive, short-term solutions and policies that lag far behind on-the-ground problems. In turn, people are lulled into a “wait-and-see” attitude, where “nothing happens unless the leaders want it to happen.” Many people said that state government needs to take a more proactive, leading role by creating regional councils, requiring regional planning, and providing funding. Some praised the work of Leadership Middle Tennessee in building leadership capacity and bringing leaders together across boundaries to exchange information and ideas.

Others saw the planning process more as a challenge of coordinating the existing leadership within the many jurisdictions. Suggestions for leadership/coordination include:

- TDOT (“where transportation goes, so goes development”).
- County and city mayors.
- MPO has the potential to lead, but is limited to 5 counties.
- County planning officials and professionals.
- State should lead the first phase, as mediator, to balance city and county issues (MPO as model).
- The Greater Nashville Regional Council.
- Planning and coordinating should come from outside the region.
- CRT.

Potential Funding Sources

In many regions, funding is a serious stumbling block. In this case, however, the region appears to have several potential sources to cover start-up and planning costs. They include:

- The MPO has about \$1 million a year in left-over funds. Requires a 20% match.
- GNRC has access to funds from the U.S. Economic Development Administration.
- TDOT provides funding for transportation projects.

People also suggested other potential funding sources, such as:

- Private/public combination of funds – look to RTA as example
- Development fees assessed at the county level
- Individual, corporate, and philanthropic beneficiaries.
- A percentage of gas tax.
- Real estate transaction fees.
- Sales taxes.
- Regional tax sharing.

Planning for Success

When asked to describe what a successful regional planning process would look like, people gave range of responses. To them, success means:

- When others understand the process and importance of regionalism.
- A plan that describes what needs to be done and offers concrete tools to get there.
- A framework for land use and transportation decision making that is proactive rather than reactive.
- A consistent planning process across all jurisdictions that fosters ownership at all levels.
- Translating regional goals/objectives into steps that are relevant at the local and county levels.
- A plan for quality growth and development, with affordable housing, higher density mixed-use, walkable communities, and use of alternative building technologies.
- A plan that not only addresses regional land use and transportation, but also includes mechanisms for mediation/negotiation, compensates “losers,” and emphasizes educating officials and the public.
- A plan that results in real outcomes – better jobs and quality of life, shorter commutes, diverse transportation options.
- An action plan that will be implemented and does not provide “false hope.”

Clinic Goals

People voiced enthusiasm for the upcoming May 24, 2006, clinic. They hope the clinic will:

- Provide examples from other regions – what issues they faced and how they addressed them.
- Provide information on a rational, multi-modal transportation system.
- Provide new ideas and not waste time.
- Be a forum where people can discuss these issues openly, with interaction among diverse stakeholders.

- Spark what has failed so far – a sustainable effort for dealing with these issues.
- Stress the importance of land use decisions to transportation (not the other way around).
- Foster leadership development, especially for rural and suburban areas.

OPTIONS FOR REGIONAL ACTION

Based on what we heard during the interviews, a critical mass of people appear ready to engage in a regional process to address land use and transportation issues in the Cumberland Region. Before such a process launches, the Lincoln Institute and Cumberland Region Tomorrow will host a clinic on regional collaboration May 24, 2006, at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro. The purpose of the clinic is to:

- Briefly review this report to validate and clarify its findings;
- Assess the breadth and depth of support for the existing vision, alternative case, and quality growth principles;
- Learn about the principles of regional action, including case studies of successful planning efforts in similar regions; and
- Develop an immediate and practical action plan based on a menu of Options for Regional Action.

A draft table of Options for Regional Action will be provided at the clinic (and afterward by mail). The table will list goals drawn from our interviews. For each goal, we'll offer choices or “action options,” including (1) successful strategies already in place within the Cumberland Region, (2) improvements that build on existing infrastructure and strategies, and (3) fresh, effective ideas from similar planning efforts in other regions. Together, these options form a menu of tools and strategies to choose from, highlighting some or blending other, to achieve the

region's stated goals. Other options will also likely emerge during the clinic.

A few weeks after the clinic, we'll issue a final version of this report that includes a summary of the discussion from the clinic. We'll also outline the roles and responsibilities people agree to as they move forward in a regional planning effort.

APPENDIX A – LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

County and City Officials

Rick Bernhardt, Executive Director, Metro Nashville-Davidson County Planning Dept.
Howard Bradley, County Executive, Robertson County
John Davis, Planning Director, Rutherford County Planning Commission
Linda Frazier, County Mayor, Dickson County
Rick Gregory, Planning Director, City of Goodlettsville
David Holderfield, Planning Director, City of Columbia
Bill Orange, County Mayor, Cheatham County (also chair of Regional Transportation Authority)
Hank Thompson, County Executive, Sumner County

Transportation Authorities

Ed Cole, Chief of Environment and Planning, Tennessee Dept. of Transportation (TDOT)
Tanisha Hall, Greater Nashville Regional Council
Bob Murphy, President, RPM Transportation Consultants, LLC
Marian Ott, former chair, Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority
Fred Schwartz, Executive Director, Nashville Metropolitan Planning Organization
Jeanne Stevens, Director, Long-range Planning, TDOT

Business and Economic Leaders

Sam Edwards, Greater Nashville Regional Council
Janet Miller, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce
Mike Neal, Executive Director, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce
Ron Samuels, CEO, Region's Bank
Tom Sherrard, Chair, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

Land and Natural Resources

Margo Farnsworth, Cumberland River Compact
Julius Johnson, CAO, Tennessee Farm Bureau
Jeanie Nelson, President and CEO, The Land Trust for Tennessee
John Porter, The Nature Conservancy

State Agencies

Joe Barker, Assistant Commissioner, Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development
Ken Belliveau, Senior Research Assoc., Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR)
Dan Hawk, Director, Local Planning Assistance, Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development
Phil Maples, Regional Director, Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development
Lynnise Roehrich-Patrick, Director of Special Projects, TACIR
Paul Sloan, Deputy Commissioner, Tennessee Dept. of Environment and Conservation.

Engineers and Architects

James Collins, transportation engineer, Kimley-Horn and Associates
Buddy Koonce, engineer, Highers and Koonce, P.E.

Educational Institutions

Jim Burton, Dean, College of Business, Middle Tennessee State University

T.K. Davis, Nashville Civic Design Center

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as the most important issues related to growth, land use, and transportation in the Cumberland Region of Middle Tennessee?
 - a. What will be the most difficult issues to build agreement on?
 - b. The easiest?
2. Would a regional land use and transportation plan be a good way to address these issues? If so, why? If not, can you suggest a better option for addressing these issues?

If a regional planning process seems like a good idea:

3. What are the boundaries of the region? What geographical area captures the relevant land use and transportation issues?
4. Who should participate in developing a regional land use and transportation plan? Consider:
 - a. Anyone affected by land use and transportation.
 - b. Anyone responsible for implementing the plan.
 - c. Anyone who might undermine the process if they're not included.
 - d. What resources can they bring to the process?
 - e. What role should they play? What should their responsibilities be?
5. Who should lead or coordinate the planning and implementation processes?
6. How should decisions be made?
7. Do you have any thoughts about funding sources for planning and implementation?
8. What information is needed to develop and implement the plan?
 - a. What information is already available? Is it credible?
 - b. What information is missing? Where can we get it?
 - c. What types of information can you provide?
9. What are the barriers to improving regional collaboration, and how might we overcome them? Think about:
 - a. Laws, regulations, policies, organizational obstacles.
 - b. Attitudes and perceptions.
 - c. How to work across city/county/regional borders.
10. Imagine implementing a regional land use and transportation plan—what does “success” look like to you? Consider:
 - a. Working relationships among responsible jurisdictions.
 - b. Generating and exchanging knowledge and information.
 - c. Specific on-the-ground outcomes.
11. What do you hope to get out of the clinic?

APPENDIX C – QUALITY GROWTH PRINCIPLES

Cumberland Region's Quality Growth Principles

(From Cumberland Region Tomorrow, May 2006)

- Guide our communities' growth with comprehensive community plans.
- Update zoning, subdivision, and building codes to achieve our communities' plans.
- Use design to protect and enhance our region's diversity of community character.
- Link land use and transportation planning as an integrated framework to guide growth and development.
- Redevelop and strengthen our region's cities, towns, and rural communities to ensure a range of unique lifestyle choices.
- Conserve our region's land, water, and natural resources to ensure our future economic, health, and cultural well-being.
- Create a variety of housing choices for our region's diverse workforce.
- Guide public and private investment to capitalize on pre-existing infrastructure and developed land.