

TO: Blount Count Planning Commission
FROM: Sarah Sinatra Gould, AICP, CZO
CC: Thomas Lloyd, AICP, Director
DATE: November 22, 2024
SUBJECT: Comprehensive Plan Executive Summary

The Comprehensive Plan for Blount County is a policy document to guide growth, development, and conservation efforts over the next two decades. The Plan describes population projections, land use, housing, education trends, and environmental stewardship. The process to update the Plan began with public engagement in which themes began to emerge. It was apparent that Blount County's identity is deeply rooted in its rural heritage, agricultural economy, and connection to nature. Proximity to the Smokies and other preserved lands supports outdoor recreation and eco-tourism while enhancing residents' quality of life. This access is a defining feature of the community and a driver for both economic and population growth. The Plan document includes a description of key features relating to growth in the County, Recommendations to address needs, Goals and Policies for implementation, and the results of the public engagement. The following is a summary of the findings in the Plan.

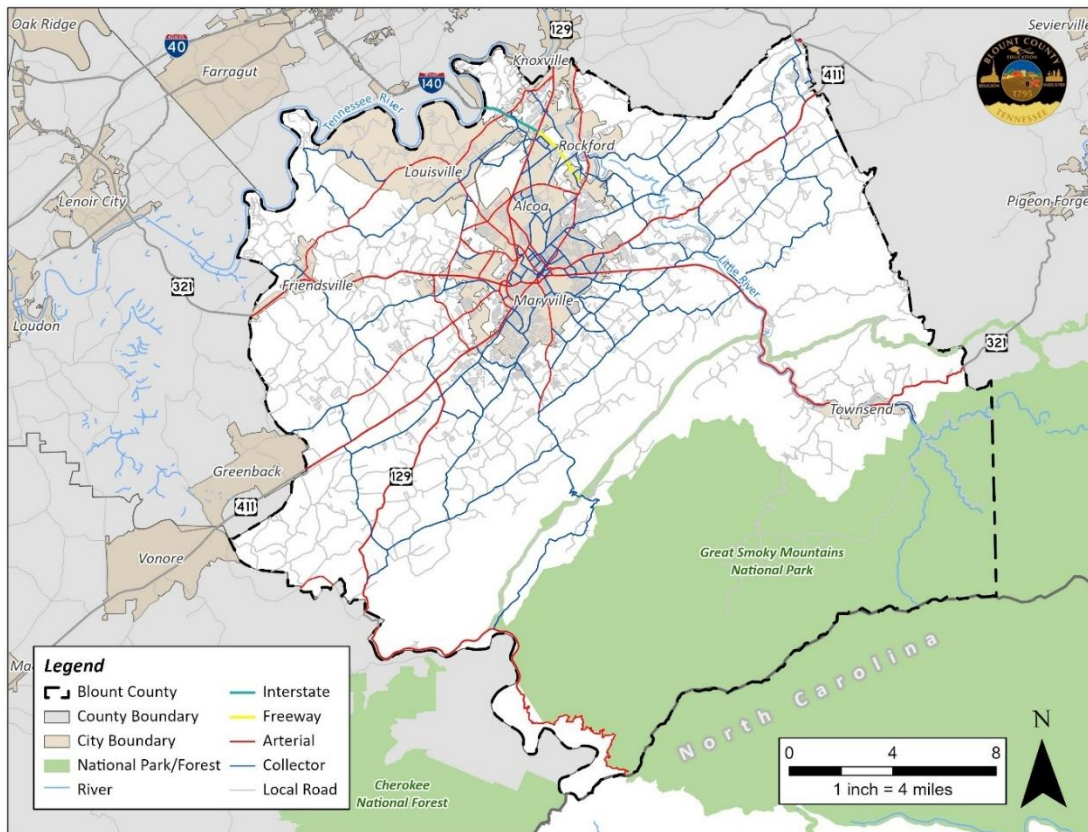
The public engagement process identified four areas of focus for the residents of Blount County: Affordable Housing, Balanced Growth, Environmental Stewardship, and Rural Character. These four topics represent shared ideas and concerns that came out of the survey, meetings and listening to public input. They are considered the Guiding Principles of the Comprehensive Plan: key ideas held in common by citizens that participated in the process. The goals and policies also have an associated time frame. Short-term means that policies may be completed within a year, medium term means that policies may be completed between 1 and 3 years, and long-term means that policies may be completed in three or more years.

Through public engagement, residents voiced concerns over losing rural character to suburban sprawl. The Plan addresses this by directing higher-density development to appropriate areas while maintaining protections for agricultural and conservation lands. Blount County's population, which stood at 136,184 in 2021, is projected to grow to 160,918 by 2045, driven by its proximity to Knoxville and availability of developable land. Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the local economy and culture, with much of the County characterized by

farmland, low-density housing, and small, close-knit communities. Residents have expressed a strong desire to preserve these rural qualities while managing inevitable growth. Blount County's housing inventory largely comprises single-family homes (75%), with a smaller share of multifamily and manufactured housing. Rising population necessitates diverse housing types, including affordable and age-friendly options, near urban centers. Current trends highlight a relatively older housing stock, with a median construction year of 1987 as well as a need for affordable housing as 39.7% of renters and 15.7% of homeowner are cost-burdened.

Part of the Plan update was to analyze the ability for the Blount County School District to adapt to growth. The County's school district serves approximately 10,000 students across 21 schools, maintaining excellent facility conditions and favorable student-teacher ratios. Enrollment is below capacity, enabling the district to accommodate projected increases in the school-age population. Projections through 2027 indicate a 2% -3% increase in students. It is likely Blount County School District can absorb this increase.

The thoroughfare map was also updated as a part of this project. The following demonstrates the updated roadway classifications.



East Tennessee is experiencing growth in population and industry, exerting development pressures on Knoxville and the surrounding counties. It is important that Blount County monitors this growth, ensuring that roadways continue to provide residents and travelers with reasonable trip times, safe conditions, and variety in available transit modes. Investments in high-traffic corridors like Pellissippi Parkway and Alcoa Highway will also contribute to improvements in safety and efficiency.

This growth will influence housing demand, infrastructure needs, and public services. The plan refines the County's future land use categories to balance growth and conservation which includes removing the Rural Arterial Commercial category and creating two Suburbanizing categories to help limit growth outside of the urban growth boundary.

Suburbanizing 1: Designed for residential development that focuses on medium-to-high density near municipalities. The high density residential (greater than 3 dwelling units per acre) should occur on land with public sewer, while medium density residential (between 1 and 1.5 dwelling units per acre) should occur on land suitable for septic tanks. Limited commercial development is allowed, specifically along arterial or collector roads. This land use category surrounds Maryville, Alcoa, and part of Louisville and Rockford, accounting for 7.5% of the unincorporated land area.

Suburbanizing 2 emphasizes low-density housing, conservation, and agriculture outside urban growth boundaries. The Suburbanizing 2 land use category is expected to be for low density residential, conservation, and agricultural. High density residential properties on public Sewer are 2 to 3 dwelling units per acre while those on septic (medium density residential) is 1 to 1.5 units per acre. This land use category is outside of the Growth Boundary and accounts for approximately 4.5% of the unincorporated land area.

Rural 1 and 2 – These categories support agricultural activities and limited residential and commercial development, safeguarding the county's rural heritage.

The creation of Suburbanizing 1 and Suburbanizing 2 is intended to address the challenges of growth outside of the Growth Boundary. This is mainly due to the availability of infrastructure. It is recommended that water and sewer improvements continue inside the Growth Boundary to support economic development initiatives as well as providing needed housing. However, it is recommended that the County invest in public utilities and infrastructure that will improve efficiencies and direct growth according to the future land use map.

The Plan also lays out recommendations as well as actionable items in the form of Goals and Policies. The following are some of the recommendations that came out of the Plan:

1. Encourage Sustainable Growth: Focus high-density development near urban centers while preserving rural areas and environmentally sensitive lands.
2. Diversify Housing Options: Promote mixed-use developments, accessory dwelling units, and affordable housing near employment and service hubs.
3. Enhance Public Infrastructure: Invest in water, wastewater, and transportation systems to support projected growth within the Growth Boundary while preserving the areas outside of the Growth Boundary for agricultural, rural, and conservation activities.
4. Identify and acknowledge areas of vulnerability where development should be diverted from to preserve Blount County throughout the planning process.

This plan is intended to equip Blount County with tools to manage growth effectively, preserving its rural charm and environmental treasures while fostering a thriving community. The following are some of the action items intended to support this goal include preserving the rural, small-town, and natural character of the County through an updated land use plan, reviewing zoning and subdivision regulations to determine if buffers and setbacks are appropriate as well as land disturbance regulations. The Goals and Policies address future land use, housing, public facilities, conservation, recreation and open space, and transportation along with an implementation schedule for achieving these initiatives.