

## SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVENESS FOR TENNESSEE'S COUNTIES FINDINGS OVERVIEW

**Bottom line:** Academic and expert practitioner “prescriptions” for development are only that – advice, which shifts over time as theoretical models change. Meanwhile, decision makers who lead our communities have their own valid basis of experience, beliefs and judgments about what their cities and counties need to stay viable and strong. Our results show that Tennessee local officials understand that success for cities and counties is about more than the traditional macroeconomic measures of jobs and population growth. Policymakers recognize the importance of *all* dimensions of community assets – traditional productive factors like land, infrastructure, and human capital, but also factors important for quality of life such as cultural, natural and social-institutional capital. Jurisdiction location – the foundation of traditional economic development – cannot be changed. But public institutional elements (like the strength of working relationships between governing officials), community attitudes, and social capital *may* be changed – and we find that in the judgment of Tennessee’s local officials, these factors do matter for jurisdiction performance.

Moreover, local officials think their jurisdiction would be more likely to cooperate with another jurisdiction if they assess their community asset base as strong, even taking into account how much difficulty they report in funding public services – this is a surprising and illuminating result. Interjurisdictional cooperation, sometimes viewed as a choice motivated by weakness or need, may be more about building on strengths, especially in the area of public and social institutional capital. This finding suggests avenues for increasing Tennessee cities and counties’ sustainable competitiveness in the future may include recognizing the value of, and strengthening, public and social institutional capital.

**Focus groups** – Location: TDDA Annual Meeting. Composition: elected officials group - 12 participants from 12 counties, 6 development districts; 8 officials at the county level and 4 at the city/town-level. Development District staff group - 12 participants from 8 development districts with various roles (planning, environmental, community development, etc.) Script led participants through discussion of “signs of success” for jurisdictions; top strengths and weaknesses of their communities at this time; and episodes of successful cooperation between jurisdictions and what “sparked” them.

- 63 themes emerged, with approximately even number of jurisdiction strengths and challenges associated with them (62 strengths and 61 challenges)
- Comments reflected a broad view of community assets, consistent with modern approach to sustainable competitiveness and beyond traditional economic development focus
- Social-institutional category of capital was the most discussed with a total of 44 statements; recurrent emphasis on “harmony”, “working together” as elements of successful governance leading to successful jurisdictions

- Twelve examples of cooperation across jurisdictional lines: infrastructure (6); knowledge/creative capital (3); productive capital (1); cultural/natural capital (2)
- Eight “sparks” to cooperation episodes: most involved social-institutional capital
- Discussions were candid and thoughtful, an excellent foundation for survey development

**Survey** – Conducted online, with email and mailed invitations to all city, county, metro executives, city managers plus email invite to county, metro, city legislators.

<i>Role</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% of pop'n responding</i>
<i>City Manager</i>	32	73	44%
<i>County Execs</i>	26	92	28%
<i>City/Metro Exec.</i>	42	345	12%
<i>County Legis.</i>	102	1,572	6%
<i>City/Metro Legis.</i>	42	1,684	2%
<b><i>Targeted roles (subtotal)</i></b>	<b>244</b>	<b>3,674</b>	<b>7%</b>
<i>Other City Official</i>	6		
<i>Other Public Role</i>	16		
<b><i>All respondents (total)</i></b>	<b>266</b>		

- Signs of success: top three ranked out of 10 indicators of a successful jurisdiction were #1 Ability to recruit and retain businesses; #2 Strong families; #3 Low crime rate. Lowest ranked was #10 General growth in population.
- Performance on signs of success for respondents’ own jurisdiction, over past three years: 46% reported progress on population growth; followed by 42% reporting progress on recruiting and retaining businesses and lowering crime rate. The fewest respondents (20%) indicated their jurisdiction had made progress on retaining and attracting young educated people.
- Own jurisdiction’s performance across 10 signs of success was only slightly associated with reported funding difficulty (assessment of difficulty adequately funding 5 – 12 provided services), and relationship disappears when community assets are taken into account
- Jurisdiction performance was very strongly positively associated with respondents’ assessment of the strength of their community asset base (across the wide range of capital types that emerged from the focus groups).
- Rural respondents tended to report lower jurisdiction performance over the past three years and a weaker community asset base than did other categories of jurisdiction (suburban, urban, mixed).
- Community asset strengths/weaknesses grouped further into four areas: cultural/natural capital; public institutional capital; attitudinal/social capital; and basic needs. All four specific areas are strongly positively associated with reported jurisdiction performance even when funding difficulty and jurisdiction/respondent characteristics are taken into account.
- Given a hypothetical scenario of the opportunity for interjurisdictional cooperation for an infrastructure grant, 62% of respondents indicated they believed their jurisdiction would

initiate cooperation. County-level officials were more likely to anticipate cooperation than were city-level officials; officials from urban jurisdictions were less likely to anticipate cooperation than were those from rural, suburban or mixed settings.

- Strength of community asset base was strongly positively associated with cooperation even controlling for funding difficulty, jurisdiction and respondent characteristics.