

From the Desk  
of the Executive Director



## Let's tell our story

There was considerable debate and outside lobbying pressure as the Legislature considered capping increases in city and county property taxes.

Members of the Senate State and Local Government Committee thought better of the idea just before it was too late.

But so-called taxpayer watchdog groups, some operating for the highest bidder, want local government leaders to explain why they know best what is needed in their local communities.

So, let's be clear. TML is not against fiscally sound government. TML is opposed to the Legislature making tax decisions for all local communities.

We believe the citizens should decide their tax rates though their locally elected officials, how the funds are used, and if there are other revenue sources to consider.

Of Tennessee's 345 towns and cities, 198 levy a lower property tax rate today than they did in 2014. Six

have not changed rate and 55 don't have a property tax at all. These are the facts.

In fairness, there have been some well-publicized rate and assessment increases.

But the stories surrounding those increases are designed to fit a narrative. We must not lose sight of the critical need to fund safe roads, vital services, and thriving communities.

The property tax cap issue will not end when the Legislature adjourns. During the coming months, engage your citizens and legislators, discuss the quality of life that we desire for our families and friends, and share the message to keep local decisions at the local level.

Don't let a select few drive the narrative. We must be clear and take action to tell the whole story.

Anthony Haynes  
TML Executive Director

## Tennessee State Data Center: Tennessee's biggest growth story may be in Cookeville



Domestic migration has helped the four-county region anchored by the city of Cookeville, pictured, become one of the fastest growing micropolitan areas in the country. Affordability and quality of life factors are drawing residents from urban and suburban areas to these more rural areas. (Photo by Visit Cookeville)

### Tennessee State Data Center

A familiar set of counties held the top ten despite some reshuffling, but the more interesting story might be at No. 11.

Davidson County posted Tennessee's largest population gain in 2025, according to newly released U.S. Census Bureau estimates. The Middle Tennessee county grew by 9,821 people over the year from July 1, 2024, to July 1, 2025 – a 1.3% increase.

Neighboring Middle Tennessee counties Rutherford and Wilson ranked second and third, adding 6,266 and 4,693 residents, respectively. Williamson (No. 7) and Sumner (No. 9) also appeared on this year's list, underscoring the continued strength of Nashville's suburban growth.

Overall, the top 10 looked much like last year, with only minor reshuffling in rank – except for Washington County in Northeast Tennessee, which returned to the top 10 for the first time since 2022. It took the No. 10 spot, replacing Loudon County.

That change was partly due to Washington County's annual growth rate, which ticked up from 0.8% in 2024 to 1.2% in 2025. Maury County was the only other top-10 county to accelerate in 2025, posting 3.2% growth, up slightly from 3.1% in 2024.

Tennessee is coming off a record single-year population increase of more than 98,200 residents in 2024. Still, the state added 63,785 residents in 2025 and growth remained widespread,

especially across the eastern two-thirds of the state.

Of Tennessee's 95 counties, 81 gained population, but about two-thirds of those counties grew at a slower rate than the year before.

That echoes a national trend in which nearly 8 in 10 counties that gained residents in 2024 posted slower growth or losses in 2025. Declines in international migration were the primary driver of that slowdown.

### WE SEE YOU PUTNAM COUNTY

Counties in Middle Tennessee and the state's other large metros, including Knox (Knoxville), Hamilton (Chattanooga), and Montgomery (Clarksville), largely cover the top 10.

But just outside that group stands rural Putnam County at No. 11. Bisectioned by I-40 and located midway between Nashville and Knoxville, its county seat, Cookeville, is home to Tennessee Tech University.

The county's population gains have been strong and steady so far this decade, averaging a 1.6% annual growth rate that nets roughly 1,300 additional residents per year. Its 2025 population addition of 1,601 was the largest increase since 2006 when it saw 1,700 new residents.

Last year's gain was notable in its own right because it was one of about a dozen Tennessee counties that posted their largest increase of the decade in 2025.

The population increases in See **POPULATION** on Page 7

## State officials expressing concern over spread of new and deadly synthetic opioid

By KATE COIL

Officials are raising awareness about a new synthetic opioid linked to nearly 35 deaths in East Tennessee.

Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) spokesperson Leslie Earhart said N-propionitrile chlorphine, also known as cychlorphine, is an emerging synthetic opioid with no known approved or medical use. According to provision data from the Tennessee Department of Health, cychlorphine is 10 times more potent than fentanyl and may be associated with more than 1,633 fatal overdoses in Tennessee since 2024.

"The TBI Crime Lab's Forensic Chemistry Unit dealt with N-propionitrile chlorphine (cychlorphine) for the first time last year. To date, 34 submissions have tested positive," Earhart said. "All of those submissions were from law enforcement agencies in East Tennessee. In some cases, N-propionitrile chlorphine is detected in combination with methamphetamine, cocaine, and fentanyl. Cy-



By the end of March, new synthetic opioid N-propionitrile chlorphine, also known as cychlorphine, had been linked to nearly 35 deaths in East Tennessee. While this high rate may be attributed to Tennessee having better testing abilities than other states, officials said cychlorphine is still a major concern with the drug being 10 times more potent than fentanyl. The drug is often found alongside other substances with many unaware they were consuming cychlorphine in the first place. (Photo by DEA)

chlorphine belongs to an emerging subclass of novel synthetic opioids known as orphines. It's more potent than fentanyl."

According to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the first reports of cychlorphine in the U.S.

were detected by a lab in Florida in 2024. In addition to state laboratories, DEA labs had identified 22 confirmed samples of the substance nationwide as of January 2026. Deaths linked to the drug See **OPIOID** on Page 3

## Nominations now open for TML Achievement Awards

Nominations are now open for the Tennessee Municipal League's (TML) annual achievement awards.

Each year, TML honors municipalities across the state for overall excellence, outstanding programs, and department accomplishments.

Any town or city that is a member in good standing with TML is eligible to nominate themselves or another member town or city.

Winners are selected by a committee comprised of municipal elected officials, past award recipients, TML board members, and MTAS consultants.

Winners will be notified prior to the annual TML Conference and Expo, to be held July 9-12, 2026, in Kingsport.

Nominations are being accepted via an online nomination form until May 1.

### Achievement Award Categories

1. Excellence in Economic and Community Development
2. Excellence in Police Service



3. Excellence in Fire Service
4. Excellence in Parks and Recreation
5. Excellence in Public Works
6. Excellence in Energy Efficiency and Conservation
7. Excellence in Overall Municipal Governance
8. Small City/Town Progress (Municipalities must have a population of 5,000 or less to qualify)
9. Innovation Award

### Criteria

Winning submissions focus on a unique project or program that has:

- Been successfully implemented

and may serve as a model for other communities.

- Increased the efficiency and effectiveness of local government.
- Significantly and positively impacted the municipality and its residents.

### Requirements to be Nominated

- Submit a summary that explains how the project, program, or department has increased efficiency in the administration of local government, improved delivery of services to citizens, and/or created cost savings for the municipality.
- To be considered for an award, the nominated municipality must be a member in good standing with TML, participate in TML activities, and support TML and its mission.
- The award recipient must attend the TML Conference and Expo July 9-12, 2026, in Kingsport.

## Watershed project helping cities build local cooperation, knowledge



In addition to adding to the beauty of Founders Park, Turkey Creek is a valuable water source for Farragut, Knoxville, and Knox County. Recently, officials from all three government entities came together with officials from the University of Tennessee to help restore the streambed at the park, part of an overall project aimed at improving the larger Turkey Creek Watershed. Officials said the project is providing valuable local outreach on watershed issues and helping strengthen intergovernmental ties and knowledge. (Photo by Farragut)

By KATE COIL

Efforts to repair a Tennessee watershed are also building intergovernmental cooperation, institutional knowledge, and public trust for two East Tennessee municipalities.

The town of Farragut, city of Knoxville, and Knox County are working collectively with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, as part of a federal grant awarded through the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC). Known as a 319 or

nonpoint source (NPS) pollution grant, the funds are used to mitigate issues created when surface water picks up pollutants that are then deposited into rivers, lakes, and other watersheds. According to TDEC, 40% of rivers, lakes, See **WATERSHED** on Page 8

## NEWS ACROSS TENNESSEE



### ASHLAND CITY

Officials in Ashland City are looking forward to the development of a new rails-to-trails project that will connect the city to the Cumberland River Bicentennial Trail. The Eagle Pass Tract is a former Tennessee Central Railroad corridor that was recently donated to the city by the TennGreen Land Conservancy for development and improvement. The property includes converted railbeds that can now provide scenic walking and biking routes that connect to the Cumberland River Bicentennial Trail and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lock A at Cheatham Lake and Dam. Providing scenic views along the Cumberland River, the town will take over management and future development of the trail section, which has become a popular local recreation area.

### COLUMBIA

Columbia officials celebrated the announcement of a major transportation improvement project along a major municipal corridor. City leaders joined state officials to announce inclusion of State Route 99 – known locally as Bear Creek Pike – in the Tennessee Department of Transportation's (TDOT) 10-Year Project Plan through the Statewide Partnership Program. The project will improve the Bear Creek Pike corridor from Nashville Highway (SR-6/US-31) to Interstate 65, enhancing roadway safety, improving traffic flow, and supporting reliable connectivity for residents, local businesses, and emergency services. TDOT has committed up to \$180 million toward the project, with construction currently anticipated to begin in 2037. The city has also pledged \$1 million annually over a 10-year period, totaling \$10 million, to support the project's funding. Due to the scale and complexity of the project, TDOT will lead project delivery in coordination with the city.

### FRANKLIN

The city of Franklin is one of the 20 finalists for the National Civic League's [All-American City Award](#). For more than 75 years, the National Civic League has recognized communities not just for what they've accomplished, but for how — by deepening relationships, crossing divides, and turning civic energy into lasting change. The annual award honors ten outstanding communities and celebrates excellence in local innovation, civic engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. Franklin previously won the award in 2020 and is one of only eight Tennessee municipalities to receive it since the award's inception in 1949.

### GALLATIN

Weyerhaeuser Company, one of the world's largest forest products companies, has selected Gallatin for a new wood products distribution center that will strengthen its ability to serve customers and manufacturing partners across the Southeast. The project represents Weyerhaeuser's first operational facility in Tennessee. The new 96,250-square-foot facility is located on a 13.83-acre greenfield site, 6 acres of which will be used as an outdoor storage yard. The distribution facility is expected to be operational by the end of the year to support the company's growing distribution network.

### LAWRENCEBURG

Lumber Liquidators announced the company will relocate its corporate headquarters and warehousing operations to Lawrenceburg from Richmond, Va. The project is a \$32.4 million investment and will create 76 jobs. The project will improve the company's supply chain operations by aligning shipping schedules and distribution efforts with its parent company, F9 Brands, which currently operates in Lawrenceburg under the brand Cabinets To Go. Lumber Liquidators was founded in Boston in 1993 as a seller of all types of building materials. By 1996, the company was specializing in hardwood flooring and today operates more than 200 stores across the U.S.

### MEMPHIS

Morgan Steel officials will create 119 new jobs and invest \$11.7 million in Memphis by expanding their headquarters and purchasing a new facility. The project includes updating equipment to accommodate increased capacity and additional projects to further meet growing customer demand. Founded in Memphis in 2014, Morgan Steel offers a full range of metal products and services ranging from cutting to welding, to powder coating, and everything in between. The company began with a team of 18 employees, and following this announcement, the company will employ more than 400 across its operations in Memphis and Greenville, Texas.

### MT. JULIET

Officials have cut the ribbon on the new Mt. Juliet Fire Station No. 3, which replaces a previous station located behind the city hall. The \$11 million, 16-square-foot fire station on Old Lebanon Dirt Road has space for training and public events, a day room, offices, a fitness room, kitchen, and space for EMS officers to stay alongside firefighters. Vehicles housed in the new fire station include a fire engine, ladder truck, ambulance, quick-response vehicle, and battalion chief's vehicle. Additionally, the property has a barn and a 32-year-old horse named Cozy Joe who came with the land when it was sold to the city.

### ORLINDA and PORTLAND

CreateEnergy officials announced the company is launching a major expansion in both Orlinda and Portland, creating a total of 1,003 new jobs and investing more than \$78 million. Central to this expansion, the company has acquired a 338,000-square-foot facility in Orlinda that will become its primary manufacturing hub, significantly scaling its production capabilities to meet growing demand for their products and solutions. Create Energy will develop 973 new jobs and invest more than \$76 million in Orlinda. Additionally, Create Energy's existing Portland facility will become the company's welcome center, dedicated research and development hub, and a production site for global partnership products, strengthening its role as a leading innovator and manufacturer in the energy sector. The company will create 30 new jobs and invest approximately \$2 million at this location. Upon completion of the two projects, Create Energy's total footprint in Middle Tennessee will exceed 475,000 square feet. Founded in 2023 in Portland, Tenn., Create Energy has quickly emerged as a U.S.-based powerhouse in renewable energy infrastructure.

### WHITE BLUFF

White Bluff officials will be using a \$160,305 grant from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's Medium- and Heavy-Duty Vehicles Grant Program to replace aging equipment for the White Bluff Street Department. The all-electric utility truck will replace a smaller, 30-year-old vehicle. The new vehicle has a larger cargo capacity to hold salt-spreading equipment in the winter. The funds will also allow a Level 2 charging station to be installed at the Bibb-White Bluff Civic Center for community use.

## Chattanooga officials break ground on second phase of One Westside project



Officials in Chattanooga broke ground on the second phase of the One Westside revitalization project, which will bring 144 new mixed-income units. Residents of College Hill Court will be given first choice to relocate to the area with the rest of the units offered at market rate. The construction is expected to be completed in 2027. Part of a "build first" strategy, the overall One Westside project will ultimately provide more than 1,100 mixed-income homes, replacing 85-year-old public housing infrastructure and reconnecting the community. Located on 300 acres on the west side of downtown Chattanooga and within a mile of the riverfront, the 7-phase development in the College Hill neighborhood is part of a \$50 million federal Choice Neighborhoods grant. (Photo by Chattanooga)

## Henning cuts ribbon on BCBS Healthy Place



Officials with the city of Henning have cut the ribbon on a new [BlueCross BlueShield \(BCBS\) Healthy Place](#) at Henning Park. The \$1.5 million investment was fully funded through a BCBS grant and includes adult fitness equipment, a community pavilion, two inclusive playgrounds for children of different ages, landscaping, and a sidewalk. Henning Park was created in downtown Henning in 2024 when citizens cleared a blighted space to redevelop it as a park location. (Photo by Henning)

## Goodlettsville, Nashville officials kick off RiverGate Mall redevelopment project



Officials with the cities of Nashville and Goodlettsville joined development firm Merus to kick off the redevelopment of the former RiverGate Mall site. The multi-phase project will transform the 57-acre site into a walkable, mixed-used district that will feature housing, retail, dining, public green spaces, new infrastructure, and bus transit options. The \$450 million project is expected to generate millions in sales tax revenue for both Goodlettsville and Nashville. Demolition and early site work are already underway with vertical construction expected to begin by the end of 2026. Phased development on the site will continue through the early 2030s. (Photo by Nashville)

# WAUFORD

J. R. Wauford & Company, Consulting Engineers, Inc.

# Emerging examples of how AI can benefit municipalities today

VC3

Many municipalities dabble in artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot, but they are hitting a wall—wondering what else AI can do for them other than answer general questions and draft documents.

While media headlines can distort AI's possibilities through hype or impractical examples, AI is starting to find its way more and more into smaller municipalities through practical applications.

Innovative uses of AI are helping these municipalities save time, use data more efficiently, improve transparency, and better serve residents.

Below are some emerging tools that show how smaller municipalities are using AI today.

## Quick Definition: What's an AI Assistant?

Below, we're going to talk a lot about AI assistants. In case you haven't heard that term, an AI assistant is not simply a person asking questions of a general-purpose tool such as ChatGPT or Copilot.

Instead, an AI assistant is a pre-configured AI system designed to operate within defined boundaries. How? An AI assistant has:

- **A constrained role:** An AI assistant is configured to perform a specific function or set of tasks—intentionally limited in its responses.
- **Defined data boundaries:** An AI assistant is designed to draw from approved, scoped data sources rather than broadly from the open internet or all available files—allowing it to operate with clearer context and reduce the risk of irrelevant or inappropriate responses.
- **Repeatable behavior:** Because of its predefined role, inputs, and instructions, an AI assistant produces consistent and predictable outputs when given similar questions rather than varying widely based on how a question is phrased or who asks it.

In practice, AI assistants allow employees or residents to ask questions and receive responses aligned to a specific body of municipal information.

When information is spread across many documents or systems, AI assistants help surface relevant information more consistently and within known boundaries. Now, let's look at a few examples.

## 1. AI Assistants for Council Meetings and Minutes

Municipalities generate a great deal of council meeting content such as agendas, packets, minutes, motions, votes, recordings, and follow ups.



Finding answers inside that archive can sometimes take hours manually digging through PDFs and shared drives, especially when institutional knowledge walks out the door due to retirements or turnover. An AI council meeting assistant can:

- Instantly search years of council meeting minutes and agendas.
- Ask plain-language questions such as, "What did council decide about short-term rentals in 2022?"
- Generate clear summaries of long discussions.
- Support FOIA or public records requests.

By retrieving accurate, citation-ready answers in seconds, your municipality can:

- Improve council meeting transparency.
- Speed up decision-making.
- Dramatically reduce time spent searching through hard-to-scan documents.

## 2. AI Policy Assistants for Frontline Staff

Policies and bylaws are an essential part of a municipality's operations—but they're often long, complex, and difficult for frontline staff to quickly navigate.

Instead, an AI policy assistant can help employees:

- Instantly find relevant policies and bylaws.
- Get plain-English explanations of complex rules.
- Provide consistent answers to resident questions.
- Reduce escalations to supervisors for routine inquiries.

Such an assistant can especially benefit departments such as permitting, public works, parks and recreation, customer service, and

bylaw enforcement, where staff are constantly fielding questions from residents. The result? Faster service, fewer mistakes, and less stress.

## 3. AI-Powered Onboarding for New Municipal Employees

In local government, the onboarding process can sometimes take months.

New employees must learn systems, policies, procedures, departmental norms, and unwritten rules—often relying on coworkers who are already stretched thin. An AI onboarding assistant can help municipalities:

- Capture institutional knowledge before it's lost through retirement and turnover.
- Provide role-specific guidance for new hires.
- Answer repetitive questions such as "How do I submit a work order?" or "What's the approval process for overtime?"
- Shorten time-to-productivity.

This kind of AI assistant can help improve retention, reduce your training burden, and create a more consistent onboarding experience across your municipality.

## 4. AI Chat on Municipal Websites for Resident Engagement

Many municipalities are adopting AI chat tools on their websites to better engage with residents.

Because these kinds of tools are becoming so common across a variety of websites, people are growing used to them—meaning that municipalities can leverage this familiarity to give residents a useful, intuitive tool to get quick answers to questions. These AI assistants can help residents:

- Find information about services, events, permits, trash pickup schedules, etc.

- Register for community programs.
- Apply for jobs.

For municipalities, the impact of this tool is significant. AI website chat can reduce call volume, free up staff time, and provide residents with 24/7 access to information. Instead of answering the same questions over and over by phone or email, your staff can focus on higher-value interactions and more complex resident needs.

## 5. AI for Research, Planning, and Data Analysis

Some municipalities are starting to use AI as a research and analysis tool, especially for planning and long-term strategy. Examples include:

- **Predictive traffic analytics:** AI systems forecast congestion and allow planners to proactively adjust signal timing, supporting both daily traffic operations and longer-term transportation planning.
- **Budget and policy modeling:** Local governments are increasingly using AI for internal research tasks such as budget forecasting, policy impact analysis, and program evaluation.
- **Predictive policing and crime analysis:** Some larger municipalities have used machine-learning models to analyze historical crime data and identify locations and patterns associated with elevated risk, with the goal of optimizing patrol allocation and violence-prevention efforts.

In one example we've seen, a municipality used AI to complete a multi-week data study in just a few days—allowing staff to move from analysis to action far more quickly.

While these examples are still

few and emerging, they demonstrate how AI can augment staff expertise and leverage mountains of data in useful ways.

## Common Questions

### Are municipalities using AI to communicate with residents?

Yes. Many municipalities are deploying AI chat tools on their websites to help residents find information, register for programs, apply for jobs, or check service details. These tools provide 24/7 access to information while reducing call and email volume.

### Is AI being used for municipal planning and data analysis?

Yes. Some municipalities are using AI for research tasks such as traffic forecasting, budget modeling, policy analysis, and program evaluation. These tools help staff analyze large datasets more quickly and move from analysis to action sooner.

### Does using AI mean municipalities are replacing staff?

No. The examples in this article show AI being used to reduce repetitive work, speed up information retrieval, and support staff expertise. Human judgment remains central to decisions, policy, and public service.

### What are the risks of using AI in a municipal setting?

Risks include using tools that are too broad, rely on unapproved data, or lack transparency. That's why successful municipal AI tools are constrained, clearly scoped, and aligned with existing governance, privacy, and records requirements.

### Where should a municipality start with AI?

A good starting point is identifying where staff spend the most time searching for information, answering repetitive questions, or training new employees. These areas often offer the clearest, lowest-risk opportunities for practical AI use.

### AI for Municipalities Is About Practical Gains, Not Hype

Across all these examples, a clear pattern emerges. Municipalities aren't using AI to replace human judgment. They're using it to:

- Find information faster
- Reduce repetitive work
- Preserve knowledge
- Improve consistency
- Serve residents more efficiently

The most successful AI implementations start small, focus on real pain points, and align with existing municipal workflows. As AI tools continue to mature, municipalities that begin experimenting now will be better positioned to take full advantage of these tools later.

# State officials expressing concern over spread of new, deadly synthetic opioid

**OPIOID**, from Page 1 have also been reported in Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Louisiana, Texas, Washington, Nevada, and California.

The Center for Forensic Science Research and Education (CFSRE) issued a [public alert](#) at the end of January to warn researchers, labs, and law enforcement following a rapid increase in detection of the drug. CFSRE said 14 of the 25 cychlorphine cases reported to them had involved its use alongside another substance. The organization said cychlorphine is the latest in "an alarming increase in deaths linked to synthetic opioids" in recent years.

A total of 11 cases were detected in East Tennessee in 2025, with Greene County seeing the most cases with 5. Since the year began, there have been 23 cases reported to date, with Sevier County seeing the most at 8 and Knox County the second most at 6.

Chris Thomas, chief administrative officer and director of the Knox County Regional Forensic Center, said Tennessee may be reporting more cases of cychlorphine-related overdoses not because the drug is more prominent in Tennessee but because Tennessee has better abilities to test for it.

"Many medical examiners across the state lack the resources and funding to perform toxicology, or turn-around time may be slower," Thomas said. "Only a few research labs currently can



Cychlorphine is often only detected once samples are sent off to labs, such as this one run by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). There is presently no way to identify the drug without sending it out to a lab for analysis, and officials with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI), said they are expecting samples to turn up outside of East Tennessee at any time. As most local law enforcement agencies do not have their own labs for testing, TBI processes most samples statewide. (Photo by DEA).

detect this. We send every suspected sample to the DEA for quantification and conformation. We do more toxicology than most."

Thomas said cychlorphine is so concerning because it is more powerful than fentanyl, fatal in

extremely low quantities, and is more resistant to medicines used to reverse overdose effects.

"It possibly has longer lasting binding receptors, which makes naloxone less effective," he said. "Knox County Health Department epidemiologists looked at the data

and determined most of these fatal overdoses were involving low income, middle- to upper-aged individuals with unstable housing."

While testing has only shown cychlorphine in cases in East Tennessee, Earhart said they expect it to spread to other parts of the state.

"Unfortunately, there is no way to identify the substance until it has been submitted to the TBI Crime Lab for analysis," she said. "If an agency has questions, we urge them to reach out to us. We have TBI agents assigned to every county across the state, and they stand ready to provide investigative and analytical support when needed."

In the meantime, Earhart said any local leaders or law enforcement agencies with questions or concerns can contact TBI.

"TBI special agents assigned to the Drug Investigation Division are actively working with local, state, and federal agencies to identify suppliers," she said. "We urge local agencies to contact us with any questions. We will provide additional information to law enforcement and to the public as we learn more about this drug."

Carrying naloxone can be lifesaving. People who use opioids, have close friends or family members who do, or are likely to be in contact with someone who uses opioids, should consider carrying it. Naloxone can be obtained from [Regional Prevention Specialists](#) with the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services or contacting one of [Tennessee's local Health Departments](#).

If you or someone you know uses opioids or needs treatment for substance use, visit the Find Help Now website or call the TN Redline at 1-800-889-9789. Contact Safe Spot at 800-972-0590 for 24/7 live support in an overdose crisis.



# PEOPLE

**Marc Coulon**, former police chief of Ashland City, died March 4, 2026, at the age of 80. A native of France, Coulon joined the U.S. Army in July 1965 and was stationed at Fort Campbell, later deploying to Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division. After being wounded in action in 1968, he received numerous military honors. He returned to the U.S. in 1970, joining the Cheatham County Sheriff's Department and the Ashland City Police Department, serving in roles including detective, assistant sheriff, and ultimately as Ashland City's police chief from 2006 until his retirement in 2019. He was named Middle Tennessee Police Chief of the Year in 2013.



Marc Coulon

and a bachelor's degree from the University of Memphis.

**Dwayne Honaker** has been selected as interim fire chief for the Bristol Fire Department. Honaker is a 29-year veteran of the department and has been serving as battalion chief since 2008. He will step into the leadership role after the retirement of current Chief Mike Carrier. Honaker joined the department in 1996 and has held numerous positions within the department before being promoted to battalion chief. He holds an associate's degree in fire science from Columbia Southern University and numerous professional certifications.



Dwight Honaker

**Jeff Damron** has been selected as the interim city manager for Tullahoma following the departure of Jason Quick in February. Damron has served as the deputy director of Tullahoma Parks and Recreation since June 2022. He also serves as a board member of the Be Yoga Strong Foundation and has held various management roles in the private sector. Damron earned an associate's degree in accounting and business administration from Motlow State Community College and is a certified parks and recreation professional through the National Recreation and Park Association.



Jeff Damron

**Brent Ham** has been selected as the new assistant Chief of the Dickson Fire Department. A more than 20-year veteran firefighter, Ham takes over the position following the retirement of longtime Assistant Chief Kane Sesler. Ham began his career as a volunteer firefighter with the department in 2003 and began working full-time in 2006. He was promoted to lieutenant in 2014 and then training captain in 2023. Ham holds an associate's degree in fire science from Columbia Southern University and is presently pursuing a bachelor's degree in fire administration.



Brent Ham

**Robbie Franks** has been selected as the new fire chief for the city of Millington. Franks has more than 27 years of fire service experience, including several leadership roles with the Memphis Fire Department. He most recently served as the deputy chief of emergency operations with Memphis Fire since 2024 and is also a member of Tennessee Task Force One and the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue team. He is also an adjunct instructor for the National Fire Academy. Franks holds a master's in public administration



Robbie Franks

**Brian Koral** has been selected as the new city manager for East Ridge after being unanimously approved by the East Ridge City Council. Koral succeeds longtime East Ridge City Manager J. Scott Miller, who retired in February following 45 years in government services. Koral has nearly 20 years of experience in local government leadership and most recently served as city administrator for Riverside, Mo., since 2018. Prior to that, he spent seven years as administrator for Atoka. Koral also spent several years working in various roles for Sedalia, Mo.



Brian Koral

## Incumbents win in Berry Hill election

Voters in the city of Berry Hill went to the polls on March 5 to return two incumbents to the city commission.

Incumbents Dennis Sheffield and Andrew S. Rusnak defeated challengers Chase Mabey and Jennifer Thomas for the two open seats. Rusnak led vote count with 57 followed Sheffield with 48, Mabey with 38, and Thomas with 20.

Sheffield presently serves as Berry Hill's mayor and was first elected to the Berry Hill City



Commission in 2017. Rusnak presently serves as vice mayor

and was first elected in 2022.

He holds a master's of public administration from Arkansas State University and a bachelor's degree in public administration from Elon University.

**Veronica McGraw** has been selected as deputy administration of Chattanooga's Department of Community Development. McGraw brings nearly 30 years of experience across the nonprofit, private, and public sectors to the position, and she previously served as bureau chief of program operations for Cleveland, Ohio. She also previously worked as deputy executive director with the state of Tennessee for nearly six years, where she helped lead statewide initiatives and policy implementation. She holds a mas-



Veronica McGraw

ter's of public administration and leadership from Ohio State University and a bachelor's degree in communications from Notre Dame College. She is also a graduate of the Tennessee Boards and Commissions Leadership Academy and the Accelerated Leadership Institute.

**Drew Muirhead** has been named the new director of water services for the city of Brentwood. Muirhead will take over the position from Chris Milton, who is retiring after more than 20 years with Brentwood's Water Services Department. A Tennessee-licensed professional engineer, Muirhead has served as Brentwood's assistant director of water services since 2016. Prior to that, he worked



Drew Muirhead

for the engineering firm Barge, Wagner, Sumner & Cannon. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Mississippi State University.

**Leslie Rucker** has been selected as city manager of Tennessee Ridge. Rucker has been with the city for 37 years, serving 29 as utility manager and 8 years as the city recorder. Rucker takes over the city manager role from Kenneth Dunavant, who served as a part-time city manager for Tennessee Ridge for 17 years, and the role will transition to full-time with her. Rucker will also continue to perform the role of city recorder until Diane Lill completes the necessary training to take over the role.



Leslie Rucker

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## No loan is too large or too small



The city of Gallatin first used TMBF programs in 1987. This loan was a \$10,009,700 fixed-rate public building authority draw loan with the rate locked in for the term to finance various public works projects for the city. The lender is a local bank, Wilson Bank & Trust. From left to right: Daniel Sampson with Wilson Bank & Trust, Gallatin Mayor Paige Brown, and TMBF Marketing Representative Kevin Krushenski.



The town of Atoka has used the TMBF loan programs 10 times since December of 2006. The latest was a \$647,221 note issue for a new fire truck for the town and a \$3 million public building authority fixed-rate drawn loan for sewer system projects. From left to right: Atoka City Recorder Rachel Covarrubias, Mayor Bary Akin, and TMBF Marketing Representative Justin Hanson.



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# Comptroller issues guidance for munis overseeing LEA budgets

The Comptroller's Office of Local Government has issued guidelines for local governments who review the annual budgets of local school districts or systems.

The recent memo presents 10 fiscal health principles for school districts, also known as local education agencies (LEAs) and local governments regarding LEA budgets.

The principles reflect the expectations of the Comptroller's Office and align with state law, federal funding requirements, and national best practices in government finance.

The principles can be applied throughout the budget cycle – from initial planning through year-end review.

Adherence to all 10 will strengthen fiscal decision-making, improve communication between entities, ensure that limited public resources are used effectively, and promote transparency, long-term planning, and sound financial management.

In addition to LEA leadership – such as finance officers, directors of schools, and school boards – these fiscal principles can also guide local government officials who review, approve, and oversee local budgets.



Many municipalities oversee the budgets of local education agencies (LEAs) within their community and are responsible for helping fund capital projects and costs associated with fluctuating enrollment. (Photo by NLC)

## DEVELOP A MULTI-YEAR BUDGET PLAN

Budgets are created on an annual basis, but they represent multi-year commitments.

A forward-looking approach that projects revenues and expenditures at least three to five years ahead allows districts to anticipate challenges and plan for evolving needs.

Aligning the district's financial projections with the county or city's broader fiscal plans fosters transparency and reduces friction during the budget process. As part of this, local governments should:

- Request long-term projections from the district before approving budget increases.
- Align school funding assumptions with debt and revenue forecasts.
- Communicate early and regularly with the school board about local revenue projections and upcoming budgetary concerns that may impact the school district.

## ADHERE TO FISCAL PLANNING TIMELINES

Timely and accurate budget submissions are essential for compliance with state law and for effective coordination between school boards and local governments.

LEAs must follow statutory deadlines, ensure submissions match the budget approved by the local funding body, and remain aware of applicable changes in law.

Local governments and LEAs must hold one another accountable for providing information, such as local revenue projections, and meeting deadlines. Local governments should:

- Clearly communicate local government and state budget submission deadline requirements.
- Hold school districts accountable to the communicated budget submission deadlines.

## FOLLOW BEST PRACTICES FOR FISCAL ACCOUNTING

Sound fiscal management depends on consistent adherence to state laws, internal accountability, and professional standards. Resources such as the [Tennessee Budget Manual for Local Governments](#), [Seven Keys to a Fiscally Well-Managed Government](#), and [GFOA best practices](#) support effective budgeting and financial reporting.

Regular budget-to-actual reviews, accurate accounting data, and timely corrective action following audits help maintain transparency and public trust. Local governments should:

- Require periodic budget-to-actual reporting from the LEA finance team for review by the budget committee.
- Ensure budget hearings include a review of school district audit findings to reinforce accountability and highlight clean audits to build public confidence.

## ASSESS MAINTENANCE OF EFFORT REQUIREMENTS



While the school year is winding down, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury Jason Mumpower is giving guidance to school systems and the local government entities that oversee them on how to both create and review healthy budgets. (Photo by Tennessee Education Commission).

## AND COMMUNICATE POTENTIAL CHANGES

Maintenance of effort (MOE) laws require local governments to budget at least the same level of funding for K-12 education each year, preventing supplanting when state funding increases.

Local governments may reduce funding below the MOE amount if an LEA is experiencing enrollment decline.

In these situations, an LEA may request a second-level MOE test to confirm that the local government is budgeting at least the same funding per student as the previous year.

Early communication between districts and funding bodies about funding allocations and enrollment trends helps ensure budgets meet legal requirements. Local governments should:

- Understand your city or county's financial obligation as it relates to local required match (the minimum amount of local funds required by the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) formula) and maintenance of effort funding (the minimum amount of funds that must be budgeted based on last year's funding amount).
- Request enrollment trend information from the school district to understand potential long-term trends and the implications for state and local funding obligations.
- Maintain consistent communication with the LEA about official revenue projections and possible reductions in maintenance of effort, if applicable.

## ESTABLISH A FORMAL POLICY ON THE LEVEL OF UNRESTRICTED FUND BALANCE

A healthy reserve supports creditworthiness, cash flow stability, and the ability to respond to emergencies or economic downturns.

The Government Finance Officers Association recommends an unrestricted fund balance of at least two months of operating revenues or expenditures, though more may be prudent depending on local conditions.



School boards should adopt a formal fund balance policy, coordinate with local officials, and avoid using reserves for recurring expenditures. Local governments should:

- Monitor school fund balance trends in budget submissions.
- Support policies that prevent the school district from having to consistently dip into their reserves to fund recurring operations, such as:
  - \* Adopting or reinforcing structurally balanced budget policies.
  - \* Engaging in joint long-term financial planning with the school district.
  - \* Maintaining local funding levels that keep pace with inflation, enrollment, and mandated cost increases.
  - \* Requiring replenishment plans when reserves are used for operational purposes.

## MONITOR KEY ENROLLMENT INDICATORS

Enrollment and other student data directly affects state and federal revenues and drives staffing and facility needs.

Sound annual projections at multiple levels – grade, school, and zone – allow districts to plan for growth or decline.

Reviewing census trends, birth rates, and housing development patterns further refines forecasts and supports long-term decision making. Local governments should:

- Request updates from the school district about enrollment trends.
- Incorporate enrollment trends into county planning for cap-

ital needs, debt issuance, and community growth patterns.

## PLAN FOR PERSONNEL COSTS

Personnel costs account for 70 to 80 percent of a typical district's budget, making careful planning essential.

Districts must consider compensation, benefits, staffing needs, and TISA salary adjustments, and work collaboratively across district and school-level leadership teams.

Keeping local governments informed about projected personnel costs reduces surprises and supports responsible long-term commitments.

Local governments should engage in ongoing discussions with school district leaders to better understand and monitor school district personnel costs and anticipate future budget requests from the school district.

## STRENGTHEN CAPITAL PLANNING

Capital costs—such as facilities, buses, and technology—require long-term planning to avoid deferred maintenance or costly borrowing.

A 10 to 20 year capital improvement plan aligned with enrollment trends helps prioritize investments and supports fiscal stability.

Sharing facility usage and condition data and coordinating planning with local governments enhances transparency and reduces conflict over limited capital dollars. Local governments should:

- Incorporate school needs into county capital improvement plans.

- Require joint planning before authorizing new debt.

## MAINTAIN STRONG INTERNAL CONTROLS

Internal controls safeguard public resources by ensuring accuracy, compliance, and proper documentation of financial activities.

Segregating duties, requiring dual approvals, and maintaining written procedures reduce the risk of fraud and audit findings.

Regular reviews and training reinforce accountability across the district. Regular assessments of internal controls are required by state law and federal regulations.

Training reinforces accountability for internal controls across the district and other responsible offices, such as centralized finance offices that manage many of the financial internal controls.

Local governments should request confirmation from the school board that district staff are exercising strong internal controls and receiving regular training.

## MAXIMIZE TRANSPARENCY TO BUILD PUBLIC TRUST

Transparency requires providing clear, accessible, and timely budget information that the public and local governments can easily understand.

Distinguishing between mandated and discretionary spending and using plain-language explanations, visuals, and public engagement helps clarify decision making.

Sharing budget timelines, posting materials online, and blending financial and programmatic context strengthen credibility. Local governments should:

- Request clarity from the school district on mandated versus discretionary costs.
- Ask clarifying questions during school district budget presentations

[Further guidance](#) on the budgeting process is available through the Comptroller's website.

Additional questions can also be directed to Tara Bergfeld with the Division of Local Government Audit at either [Tara.Bergfeld@cot.tn.gov](mailto:Tara.Bergfeld@cot.tn.gov) or at (615) 401-7730

## STATE BRIEFS



Tennessee's January 2026 unemployment rate was down one-tenth of a point from December and unchanged from January 2025. Tennessee's January 3.5% unemployment rate remained steady compared to the average unemployment rate in 2025 and is also well below the national January 2026 unemployment rate of 4.3%. Between January 2025 and 2026, Tennessee added 5,900 nonfarm jobs with the largest increases in the health care and social assistance sector followed by state government and the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector. The state has also compiled a comprehensive analysis of the [January 2026 statewide unemployment data](#).

State officials have announced the approval of \$202 million in state-administered federal funding to expand broadband access throughout Tennessee. The money allocated for the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program will be matched by \$200 million in funds by grantees to create \$402 million in broadband investment. The projects align with the state's broader strategy to expand high-speed internet and ensure long-term connectivity for all Tennesseans. The ultimate goal of the project is to ensure all Tennesseans have access to reliable, high-speed broadband by 2028. Tennessee's BEAD-funded projects have an anticipated completion date of December 2028. The [state broadband accessibility map](#) can be utilized as a resource to search locations, addresses, and the internet service provider awarded.

The Delta Regional Authority (DRA) is making \$4 million available to support workforce development. The [Delta Workforce Grant Program \(DWP\)](#) makes targeted investments toward projects and initiatives aimed at bolstering the local and regional workforce of the 255 counties and parishes within the DRA eight-state service region. Award amounts will range between \$50,000 to \$300,000. Deadline to

## Love Your Block grant period opens

Love Your Block is a two-year civic engagement program that brings city leaders and residents together to strengthen neighborhoods, one block at a time.

Selected cities will receive \$270,000, coaching, and implementation support to turn community priorities into action.

From transforming vacant lots into community gardens to removing trash and debris from a public right-of-way, the program supports cities in engaging with their residents to design, develop, and deliver small-scale neighborhood improvement projects that

apply for the 2026 DWP is Friday, May 15, 2026. In 2025, DRA invested approximately \$7 million toward 25 workforce development projects, supporting economic development and prosperity within the DRA region. For more information about the [Delta Workforce Grant Program](#), visit [www.dra.gov](#). For questions about the program, email [workforce@dra.gov](#).

Tennessee ranked 44 out of 50 states in the annual [America's Health Rankings](#), compiled yearly by the United Health Foundation. The state's ranking came from factors like its high premature death rate, low voter participation rate, the low number of mental healthcare providers per capita, and increasing rates of unemployment and firearm-related deaths. Tennessee ranked 46 out of 50 for healthy behaviors and health outcomes, 45 for clinical care rates, and 38 for social and economic factors. The state's strengths included its high volunteerism rate, high number of primary care providers per capita, and low levels of air pollution. Additionally, Tennessee ranked 15 out of 50 in terms of its physical environment.

Cyclists can now experience 37 newly curated gravel cycling routes as part of the [Tennessee Department of Tourist Development \(TDTD\)](#)'s [Bike Tennessee](#) program. The routes bring the total number of routes to 89 and add more than 1,000 miles of diverse terrain. In addition to creating even more opportunities for cyclists and outdoor enthusiasts to explore the state on two wheels, TDTD said the state now has 1,800 miles of cycling trails across 50 counties. The state has also developed the Ride with GPS app in collaboration with cycling guide Shannon Burke of [Tennessee Gravel](#) to help riders access routes. Bike Tennessee's recent growth aligns with Tennessee's thriving outdoor economy, which generated \$15.6 billion in 2024 and ranks No. 4 in the Southeast, according to the [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#).

make their communities and cities better places to live.

Established and supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, Love Your Block builds on the successful legacy of Cities of Service, which has helped hundreds of mayors and municipalities engage residents as a leading voice in public problem-solving since its launch by New York City mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in 2009.

The deadline to apply is June 1, 2026. Learn more about the program or submit your application on the [Love Your Block website](#).

## TDOT to pilot autonomous freight trucks on West Tennessee I-40 corridor



With partner Cavnué, the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) will be piloting Connected and Autonomous Vehicle (CAV) freight technologies on the Interstate 40 corridor near Blue Oval City. (Photo by Cavnué)

A program piloting the use of autonomous tractor trailers and freight technology will soon be coming to Interstate 40 in West Tennessee.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) announced the selection of Cavnué, LLC as its private-sector partner for the Memphis/West Tennessee Smart Freight Corridor Pilot, a major initiative aimed at improving safety, reducing congestion, and advancing freight technology along I-40 between Memphis and Blue Oval City.

The multi-year pilot will evaluate Connected and Autonomous Vehicle (CAV) freight technologies in real-world operating conditions, giving TDOT the data and insights needed to shape long-term freight modernization strategies for Tennessee.

This project is TDOT's first dedicated smart freight initiative, allowing the department to partner with Cavnué to test smart freight technologies in real-world conditions while the state maintains control of the roadway, data, and future decisions.

In the coming months, the firm

## April deadline approaches for new online ADA requirements

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office is reminding local governments about new federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for websites and social media.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a final rule updating its regulations for Title II of the ADA. These updated ADA requirements are in addition to any existing applicable requirements related to accessibility or otherwise.

The updated rule requires public entities to ensure their web content and mobile applications are readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities and that their web content and mobile applications comply with Level A and Level AA

will begin project planning and design work under TDOT oversight. Upon TDOT approval, the project will advance to temporary on-road testing, followed by a final evaluation to inform future freight and infrastructure decisions.

Under this Initiative, the firm will lead the following project work:

- Conducting detailed corridor and infrastructure analysis
- Developing the pilot's concept of operations and design
- Installing temporary roadside and vehicle-based technologies
- Collecting and analyzing real-time freight and traffic data
- Evaluating system performance, safety impacts, and operational benefits
- Stakeholder engagement

The I-40 corridor serves one of Tennessee's busiest and most economically vital freight routes. With rapid industrial growth in West Tennessee, including major investments in and around Blue Oval City, freight volumes are expected to continue to increase in the

coming years. The Smart Freight Corridor Pilot will help TDOT better understand how emerging freight technologies can:

- Improve safety and reduce congestion
- Support connected freight applications across multiple fleets
- Enhance incident response and system efficiency
- Inform long-term planning and statewide freight modernization strategies

The pilot is expected to run through 2028, including planning, design, installation, testing, and up to one year of performance evaluation.

Leaders noted that adopting emerging technologies is essential for strengthening Tennessee's freight corridors and positioning the state for advancements in autonomous and connected freight systems that improve safety, mobility, and reliability.

As this project advances into planning and design, TDOT will share additional updates.

success criteria and conformance requirements specified in the Web Content

[Accessibility Guidelines \("WCAG"\) 2.1. Web Content](#) includes, but is not limited to, websites, webpages, online forms, PDFs, and social media posts. The deadlines for compliance with these requirements depend on public entity population size:

- Local governments with a total population of 50,000 or more must comply by April 24, 2026
- Local governments with a total population of fewer than 50,000 or a special district government as defined in the federal rules

must comply by April 26, 2027. The DOJ has [issued several resources](#) to help guide compliance.

Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumpower advised local governments to ensure they are prepared to comply with the new rules.

"We are sharing this information with local officials to raise awareness of this federal requirement," Mumpower said. "While we are not able to offer technical guidance or legal advice regarding its implementation, we encourage you to consult the U.S. Department of Justice or your legal counsel."

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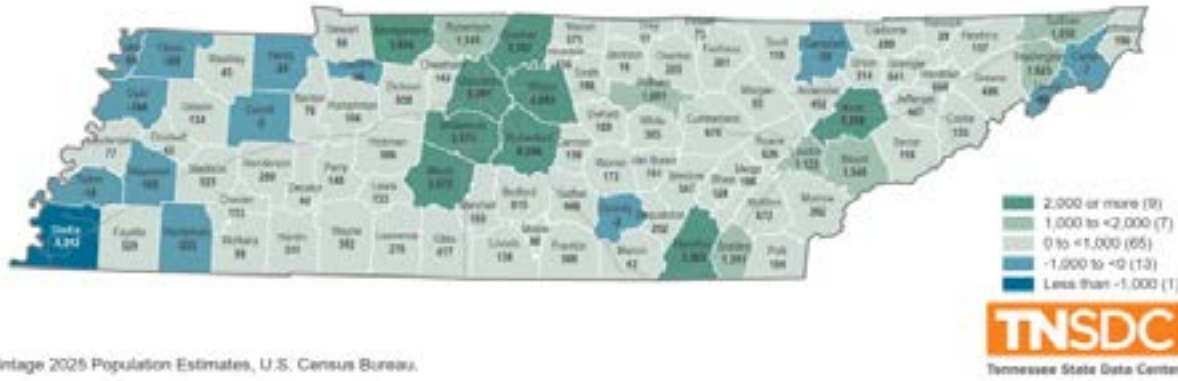
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# TSDC: Tennessee's biggest growth population story may be in Cookeville

Population Change in Tennessee, 2024 to 2025



Vintage 2025 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.



While the top ten Tennessee counties for population growth have not changed, officials with the Tennessee State Data Center (TNSDC) said the most interesting population growth story is coming from the Cookeville micropolitan statistical area. Putnam County was ranked 11 in terms of growth, leading a growth trend in the Upper Cumberland region of the state. (Photo by TNSDC)

**POPULATION, from Page 1**

Putnam County have been primarily driven by net domestic migration – the difference between inbound and outbound moves among U.S. counties. This year’s 1,473-person increase in the component was also its largest this decade. But it was a different top 10 list that brought the spotlight to the Upper Cumberland in 2025.

Putnam County is also the core of the [four-county Cookeville micropolitan area](#), which includes Jackson, Overton, and White counties. This statistical area [ranked fourth nationwide for numeric growth](#) among all U.S. micropolitan areas in 2025. [Micropolitan areas](#) are built around a core city of under 50,000 people and the surrounding counties that are economically tied to that core, often through commuting.

More than a local story, these increases highlight an important, broader trend: the state’s 78 rural counties have matched or outpaced the growth rate of its 17 urban counties every year this decade.

Growth in rural counties like Maury, Putnam, Bedford and Coffee is occurring well beyond the suburban edge, bringing attention to the affordability and quality-of-life factors that might be behind it.

**MIGRATION LEVELS SETTLE TO TREND**

A total of 81 Tennessee counties gained population in 2025, down from 85 in 2024 and the fewest since 2022, when 80 of the state’s 95 counties added residents. Still, that remains above pre-pandemic levels, when roughly 75 counties posted annual gains.

Net domestic migration remains the predominant driver of Tennessee’s population growth, and it’s remarkably widespread—87 of the state’s 95 counties gained more domestic movers than they lost in 2025.

The counties that didn’t were mainly confined to the western third of the state, with Shelby County posting the largest net loss from this component at 11,670 people. Montgomery County was the only county in Tennessee where natural increase (more births than deaths) was the prevailing source of population change in 2025.

But while the pattern holds, the pace has cooled. After the red-hot domestic migration numbers of 2022 and 2023, the state appears to be settling back towards pre-pandemic norms.

The last 2 years have averaged about 44,400 net domestic movers—not far from the 42,400 annual average in the final 4 years of the prior decade.

To an even larger degree, this may also be true for the elevated

levels of net international migration, [which reached record highs](#) in 2024 for both Tennessee and the nation. But 2025 saw Tennessee’s figures fall 62%, and the new estimate release shows how this change played out at the county level.

Last year, all 95 counties in Tennessee had international migration totals that were the same as or smaller than in 2024.

Nowhere was that more true than in Davidson County, where levels fell by over 8,200 people in 2025. Shelby County numbers were down by more than 6,000 people over the year.

In 2025, 36 Tennessee counties saw net international migration turn negative, up from just 6 in 2024 when the state’s totals were at a record high. While the nation’s net international migration is [expected to fall even further in 2026](#), the question is where it settles.

Before the pandemic, Tennessee’s net international migration averaged more than 9,000 people per year. It fell to roughly 4,000 annually from 2019 to 2021 before surging to those record highs in 2024.

Where levels ultimately land within that range – or below it – will determine how many more counties are affected, and in some cases, whether the pullback tips more parts of the state into population loss.

## NATIONAL BRIEFS



**The Federal Reserve left interest rates unchanged from a range of 3.5 to 3.75% in the wake of inconsistent job gains, little progress in bringing inflation down to 2%, and economic uncertainty related to the conflict in Iran. Prices have risen to a 2.8% annual rate since January, according to the personal consumption expenditures price index, which helps gauge inflation. Taking out more volatile food and energy prices, the rate has been at 3% since January, a full percentage**

point above the Fed’s target rate of 2%. The U.S. Labor Department also noted producer prices have risen to a 3.4% annual rate, the largest one-year increase since February 2025. Economists predict that tariff policy changes may increase trade volatility in 2026 and keep producer prices elevated.

**A massive drop in immigration has led to declining growth rates in most U.S. counties and metro areas, according to a new report from the U.S. Census Bureau. The vast majority of population areas**

had slower gains last year, primarily due to a slowdown in international migration, which had been helping urban areas recover from pandemic-era losses. The average growth rate was 0.5% between 2024 and 2025, down 1% over the previous year. While the rate of births minus deaths held steady, international migration had a 55% drop. As deaths outpace births, much of the country had relied on immigration as a primary growth source.

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**April 20 –26: Paris**  
[World’s Biggest Fish Fry](#)  
This event is a celebration of the area’s rich fishing heritage and features a variety of activities.

**April 24-26: Brownsville**  
[Hatchie BirdFest](#)  
Enjoy birding and the outdoors at the annual Hatchie BirdFest.

**April 24-26: Knoxville**  
[Dogwood Arts Festival](#)  
Spring in East Tennessee means blooming dogwoods and the return of one of Knoxville’s most beloved traditions.

**April 25: Gallatin**  
[Square Fest](#)  
With more than 230 vendors and food trucks, approximately 30,000 people will visit Downtown Gallatin for the annual spring festival.

**April 25: Johnson City**  
[ArtStruck Festival](#)  
Collect artworks from more than 50 art vendors, enjoy this year’s exciting festival highlights, participate in art activities for all ages, and more.

**April 25-26: South Pittsburg**  
[National Cornbread Festival](#)  
This quaint southern town will host a celebration of cornbread, considered the cornerstone of southern cuisine.

**April 26-May 2: Trenton**  
[Trenton Teapot Festival](#)  
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**April 28-30: Goodlettsville**  
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**May 2-7: Dresden**  
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**May 2-3: Dunlap**  
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**May 7-9: Gainesboro**  
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**May 15-16: Sevierville**  
[Bloomin’ BBQ Festival](#)  
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**May 16: Unicoi**  
[Wayne Scott Strawberry Festival](#)  
A celebration of community spirit and neighbor support featuring handmade crafters and artisans.

**May 16-17: Greeneville**  
[Greeneville Iris Festival](#)  
Featuring arts, crafts, merchandise, food, and entertainment from across the region.



**Ed Stewart, ChFC, CLU, CF Financial Advisor**

# Watershed project helping cities build local cooperation, knowledge

WATERSHED, from Page 1

and estuaries are not fit for basic uses like fishing and swimming because of NPS pollution.

Cliff Mann, stormwater coordinator with the Farragut Engineering Department, said the watershed touches all three government entities in different ways, but issues with erosion can have a negative impact on everyone.

“The streambank restoration is needed when streambanks become more vertical, and they are eroding, which allows sediment into the creek,” he said. “TDEC classifies sediment as the No. 1 pollutant in Tennessee’s waters because the sediment bonds with pollution and carries it off into the water. The town of Farragut is a little over 16 square miles, so we are highly urbanized, and urbanization is also what is causing the degradation of the integrity of our streams.”

Patrick Kontovich, stormwater engineer with the Knoxville Stormwater Division, said what happens upstream in Farragut can impact Knoxville’s part of the watershed.

“The watersheds don’t know political boundaries, so there is an opportunity for someone to do a project in the watershed upstream from the city of Knoxville. That is also great for us,” Kontovich said. “We have some of the bigger watersheds that we spend most of our time in, but there are also some smaller ones on the outskirts. The area surrounding Turkey Creek is mostly commercial, so for us that means concerns over pollutants like plastics and hydrocarbons from fueling stations. Sediments and bacteria are also concerns statewide. If we can get to that before it becomes more significant, we can stop some of that pollution.”

As part of the project, the three local governments and university officials came together at Farragut’s Founders Park at Campbell Station for a public workshop aimed at preventing further NPS pollution by repairing erosion to the part of the Turkey Creek Watershed that flows through the park.

Members of the public were invited to learn more about watershed protection, how their local stormwater authorities are working together, and to get some hands-on experience creating a 270-foot riparian buffer on the park’s creekbank. Officials from TDEC and UT delivered presentations explaining the issues with NPS pollution and how citizens and local governments could replicate the natural buffer in other trouble spots.

The buffer was comprised of a biodegradable material made from packed coconut fibers known as coir logs and a matting put in place to control erosion. Native plants filled the gaps in the matting and will continue to stabilize the bank long after the coir logs have degraded.

“Trees stabilize the creek banks and provide shade, which allows the creek temperature to stay stable,” Mann said. “That allows the surrounding flora and



Local residents, professors and students from the University of Tennessee, and stormwater officials from Farragut, Knoxville, and Knox County spent an afternoon at Farragut’s Founders Park repairing riparian erosion on Turkey Creek. The workshop involved an educational session with presentations on how the mitigation project would work and then a hands-on component where participants got a chance to put what they had learned into action. (Photo by Farragut)

fauna to survive and prevents more algae from growing. The non-native plants have shallow root systems, but they will choke out native plants that have a deeper root structure. By planting those native plants, you can get in that good root structure and stop that erosion. We are hearing a lot about how there are so many microplastics in the water, so we wanted to make sure we were putting down something that wouldn’t add to that problem.”

Mann said projects like these bring together professionals to educate the public about how they can improve their community.

“If we could do something like this every year, it would be great,” he said. “Engineers, developers, landscape architects, and other professionals already know this stuff. But it’s so important to get the general public involved and educate them on erosion and what it does to water quality, as well as how we can protect wildlife, like the salamanders we were finding in that creek”

Kontovich said citizens attending the workshop can then, in turn, support the city’s stormwater department with their new knowledge.

“The people who attend these workshops generally have interest in repairing a stream bank on their property, and they may have some understanding that sediment is bad,” he said. “We give them the knowledge to do some repairs,



Local stormwater officials are hoping citizens who participated in the workshop will take the lessons learned back to their own neighborhoods and homes and undertake their own mitigation work. The project has also brought stormwater officials together with researchers and the private sectors to learn the latest technology for preventing sedimentation. (Photo by Farragut)

and we build relationships beneficial to all. We have citizens who serve as volunteers on clean ups, and we get a lot of water quality concerns reported through 311. They are our eyes and ears out

there.”

Projects like this can also go a long way to prevent issues like flooding.

“Ultimately, the cleaner the water we can get discharged into creeks, the easier it is to assess that water for drinking,” Mann said. “The more sediment, the longer it takes to get that filtered out. One of the biggest causes of flooding is pinch points where culverts cross roads. If a bunch of debris gets trapped there, it impounds the water, slows it down, and ponds it up. The water gets out of the banks and then you have a flooding issue on the road and the surrounding property.”

In addition to the public-facing project, the grant program has also brought together stormwater officials from all three governments, engineers, developers, landscape architects, and UT’s knowledge base to exchange ideas and learn about the latest tools and techniques in the industry.

“The knowledge UT has on how to repair these streambanks is well beyond the knowledge I have, so I am learning a lot from them,” Kontovich said. “Sharing resources, putting all your knowledge together, and getting that out to the public is important for all of us.”

As someone newer to his position, Mann said the project is also helping him build important connections with other local government and industry professionals that will ultimately benefit Farragut.

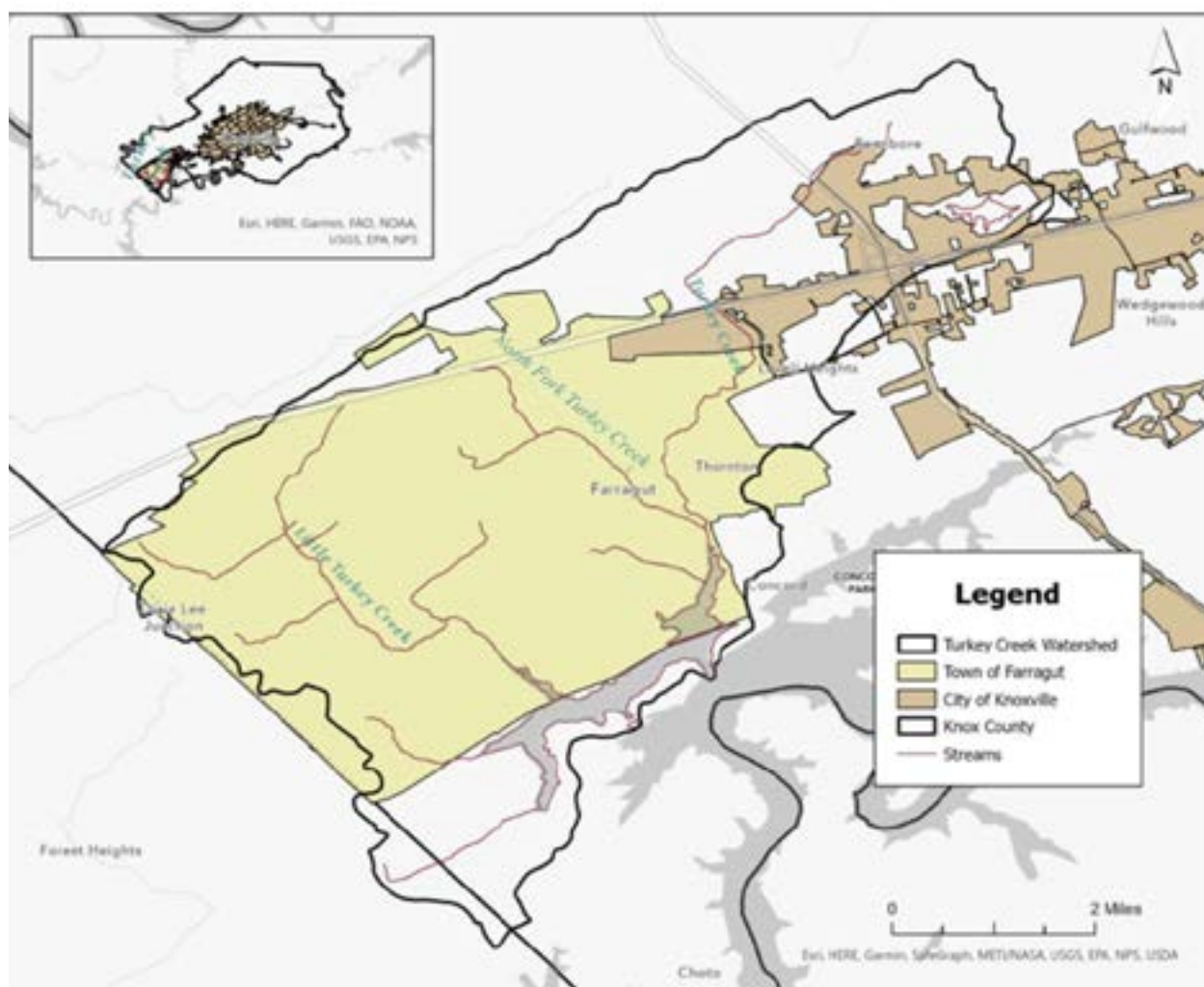
“This is only my second

year of doing this particular job, so I didn’t have as much of the knowledge that folks at Knox County, the city of Knoxville, or the engineers at UT have,” Mann said. “It was great to put our minds together to come up with a solution to this problem. We all have a share in this because we are all in this watershed. It can also be important for the different stormwater departments to get things consistent with how we do things and get a good working rapport. It’s good to have a network of folks you can ask if you have an issue. They can put some extra eyes on something and maybe see something you haven’t.”

So far, Kontovich said the workshops have proven successful, and he is looking forward to partnering with Farragut, Knox County, and UT on some future workshops.

As the project continues, Mann said they are hoping to identify other areas of the watershed that can be improved.

“As part of the project, an engineering firm is doing digital stream assessments on all 25 miles of stream in Farragut to help identify problem areas. We can then do some smaller projects to stabilize the banks and reintroduce native plants,” Mann said. “We are trying to target areas where we can get the most bang for our buck and spend this grant money the best we can. Sometimes you have to start small, but it can have a big impact.”



While Turkey Creek is the dominant watershed for Farragut, parts also serve residents of Knoxville and Knox County. As a result, both residents and government officials in all three entities have a stake in ensuring sediment and erosion remain under control. (Photo by TDEC)