

2026 REGIONAL LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

For three decades the Chambers of Commerce of **Oak Ridge, Blount County** and **Knoxville** have worked together to develop a regional legislative agenda to identify state issues of importance and increase job and business growth in the region. In 2021, the **Farragut West Knox** and **Anderson County** Chambers of Commerce joined this initiative. The following items will be the primary focus of this joint effort, with a specific emphasis on points affecting the most currently critical issues of **Workforce, Housing, and Childcare**.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To attract, retain, and expand business in our region, we:

- Encourage the state of Tennessee to implement an initiative to attract skilled and educated workers to our state to meet the needs of our existing and future employers.
- Support local governments' continued ability to promote economic development and affordable housing through public/private partnerships (TIF, PILOT, and Housing Tax Credits) and encourage the state of Tennessee to enhance these efforts.
- Support the enhancement of infrastructure and training incentives, and the establishment of technology-driven incentives to recruit and retain high-skilled, high-wage jobs that further the region's reputation for innovation.

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

To ensure a high-quality, capable workforce in the future, we:

- Support an accountability model for Tennessee school systems that includes seamless pathways and a measure of quality career and technical education, including industry-recognized certifications, work-based learning, dual enrollment and expand post-secondary opportunities.
- Add Work-Based Learning as one of the criteria for the Tennessee Department of Education's Ready Graduate indicator, a statewide accountability measure, to be included as an Early Post Secondary Opportunity or as an alternative to an industry credential.
- Support efforts to expand college access and affordability for all Tennesseans, including funding for industry-recognized credentials that meet the region's specific workforce demands and to close the gap between Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect to include adults younger than 24.
- Oppose any state action that would result in mandating the election of school system superintendents.

CHILDCARE

Because the lack of childcare is impeding our workforce, resulting in lost earnings and revenue of \$2.3 billion in Tennessee, we seek to:

- Support efforts that increase access to quality and affordable childcare by incentivizing businesses to co-invest in childcare with their employees and/or community, including through business tax credits.
- Strengthen the early childhood education workforce by reexamining requirements to become a preschool teacher and recognizing credentials from other states.
- Increase the reimbursement rate for childcare vouchers to individuals in need to reflect the true cost of care.
- Make high-quality pre-K an option for more families and develop a mixed delivery system to optimize parental choice.

HEALTH CARE

To encourage a healthy workforce, we:

- Support health policies, particularly those addressing mental health, youth substance abuse prevention, substance misuse, abuse, and addiction, which improve the welfare of the state's workforce.
- Continue building the healthcare workforce pipeline by advancing Work in Tennessee initiatives, with a special focus on expanding the mental health workforce, particularly in counties with limited provider access.
- Support state-sponsored trade schools that offer career pathways into healthcare fields.
- Support the addition of a mental health facility that will provide longer-term treatment to patients in the greater Knoxville area.
- Support businesses, perhaps through tax credits and other measures, to encourage the workforce to be as healthy as possible through health improvement benefits.

INFRASTRUCTURE & TRANSPORTATION

To provide the infrastructure needed for economic growth, we:

- Support short- and long-term solutions for interstate congestion and regional arterials that ensure connectivity and mobility for commuters, deliverers of goods, and tourists.
- Support efforts to ensure water, sewer, and gas infrastructure is maintained and expanded to accommodate a growing population and economic development opportunities.
- Continue to advance the region's position as a national leader in nuclear energy through continued investment in the nuclear energy ecosystem to help secure energy independence and continue economic growth.
- Support efforts to increase the capacity of and expand and upgrade the infrastructure of electrical utilities to meet demands of growing economy.
- Support efforts to recruit air carriers and additional flights to and from key markets out of McGhee Tyson Airport and continue support for capital improvements at the airport to support the future needs of air travel in East Tennessee.

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ENTREPRENEURSHIP & SMALL BUSINESS

To create a healthy ecosystem for business startups, growth, and longevity, we:

- Increase the availability of capital by leveraging funding sources to invest in technology-based firms to foster innovation and the creation of high-skilled, high-paying jobs.
- Increase access to capital for entrepreneurs and startups, particularly those aligned with business and scientific assets in the region.
- Advocate for continued state matching funds for award recipients of the federal Small Business Innovation (SBIR) AND Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs.
- Promote access to AI resources and education for entrepreneurs and small businesses to reduce barriers to adoption and strengthen regional competitiveness.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

To ensure responsible innovation and the successful integration of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies into the business community, we:

- Support collaboration between business, higher education, and research institutions to advance safe and ethical applications of AI and related technologies.
- Encourage state investment to train, attract, and retain a highly-skilled AI workforce that meets the needs of both large industries and small businesses.
- Support incentives to recruit technology companies that provide high-quality jobs paying at or above the local living wage.
- Encourage the creation of guidelines for reasonable AI use that balances innovation with consumer protection, data privacy, and cybersecurity.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

To ensure sustainable growth and equitable access to housing in our region, we:

- Support increased state investment in affordable and workforce housing, ensuring that teachers, healthcare workers, and first responders can live in the communities they serve.
- Encourage the expansion of state housing trust funds, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, and other financing tools that spur development of affordable rental and ownership opportunities.
- Support down payment assistance programs, financial literacy initiatives, and pathways to sustainable home ownership, especially for first-time buyers and underserved communities.
- Encourage infrastructure investments (water, sewer, transportation) that align with housing needs to ensure growth is both affordable and sustainable.

