What is needed to grow a local and regional Green Economy (GE) that brings good jobs with good wages, benefits, and secure careers?

- More coordination is needed among GE leaders. Many are unaware of the work being conducted within or across sectors. As a result, there is an inconsistency in goals and counterproductive efforts. This thwarts collaboration.

- Knoxville needs to position itself as an industrial locale known for its interest in and action toward sustainability. Although considerable gains have been made, especially through City efforts (e.g., becoming a Solar American Cities partner, adopting the 2012 International Green Construction Code, implementing single-stream recycling, and more), the area lacks a recognizable “brand.” This is consistent with findings that show Knoxville, despite considerable strengths, lacks recognizable industry clusters.

What current strategies address these needs?

- The UT, ORNL, and TVA nexus provides a hub of creativity and energy, especially in the fields of advanced manufacturing, agriculture, energy, transportation, and medicine. Continuing to grow recognizable clusters in green industries will attract related businesses and skilled workforces.

- Innovation Valley is a partnership of eight agencies managed by the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce to implement Blueprint 2.0, which is its second five-year plan to regionally grow four industrial clusters (i.e., advanced technology and manufacturing, corporate services, creative media services, and transportation). They also have the mission of branding the area as “Innovation Valley.”

- NAI Knoxville and others are working to establish a Knoxville Chapter of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), which is a worldwide research and education organization focused on sustainable development and supported by over 36,000 members that facilitates the exchange of ideas, information, and experiences among members.

- The South Waterfront Development may be considered as Knoxville’s first “eco-district.” Built into its code are several environmentally-friendly requirements, including permeable pavement, reflective roofs, and pollution-mitigating street lights. The district is also strategically located near the Urban Wilderness project, which is a preservation initiative led by Legacy Parks Foundation that manages 40 miles of trails, 10 parks, four Civil War sites, and a variety of other outdoor activities.

Assets- what other current activity can be leveraged to support specific strategies in place?

- Several assets contribute to an attractive business climate: high quality of life, low taxes, low energy costs, and the “three-legged-stool” of UT, ORNL, and TVA. The area is also centrally located between two major highways and near Charleston Port.
• Knoxville has several natural attractions, including but not limited to: close access to the Smoky Mountains, the Tennessee River, over 86 miles of paved greenway, over 5,000 acres of forest, farm, and parkland, the Urban Wilderness project, which trail’s connect to Ijams Nature Center, Ross Marble and Mead’s Quarries, Forks of the River Wildlife Management Area, and more. Over the last year, Knoxville also hosted a national marathon, as well as a mountain bike and paddleboard race. Such assets improve quality of life, attract millennials, and support green business growth (e.g., sporting good stores, farmers markets, eco-hotels, and locally-sourced restaurants).

Obstacles- what keeps these assets from being more successfully pursued at this time?

• There is a shortage of land available for industrial development. Although land scarcity and progressive planning is driving brownfield development, strong intra-regional cooperation will be necessary to accommodate future industry growth.

• Despite the UT-ORNL-TVA nexus, the area has a tough time attracting and retaining a young and high-skilled workforce. Brain drain is perceived as an especially plaguing problem. Additionally, there is a large segment of the existing population that is not being brought up to its potential. There is a need for more and accessible training in growing fields, especially for new workforce entrants and the rural/urban poor.

• Several of the area’s rural communities do not have cell phone or high-speed Internet access. This prevents a large segment of the population from fully participating in the economy, green or not.

• Low taxes, although contributing to a favorable business climate, leave many public services, such as public education, underfunded. The regressive tax also disproportionally affects low-income residents.

What are some suggested strategies?

• Support the East Knox County Business Park and push developers to adopt green standards. The proposed park would help address the lack of land available for industrial development and is projected to create over 2,000 jobs.

• To address brain drain, offer more robust mentorship opportunities to young researchers and professionals exiting the University. Stronger university-industry partnerships would not only contribute to the area’s skilled workforce but also to local and regional innovation.

• Leverage natural resources to strengthen the area’s eco-tourism industry. Many eco-tourists traveling to the Smoky Mountains pass through Knoxville, and boosting the area’s industry may entice them to visit for a while. A stronger eco-tourism industry would also promote outdoor activity and environmental awareness among local and regional residents, as well as attract millennial workers.

Action priorities- what to do and in what order? Stay tuned for the breakout session.