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

• There is a need for greater political and cultural commitment to energy efficiency and green building. Area leaders need to bolster advocacy, especially to raise awareness among consumers.

• There is a need for a stable incentive structure that prioritizes local and regional green jobs. Green jobs, especially in solar installation and weatherization, have been characterized by a boom and bust tendency, which creates unstable markets and unsecure employment. For example, a surge of funding in 2008 from both ARRA and TVA led to a boom in green energy-related jobs, which consequently led to a bust in 2012 when funding dried up.

• As newer and greener codes are adopted, a wide variety of stakeholders must be trained and educated. This includes: developers, owners, architects, engineers, consultants, builders, commissioners, and codes officials.

• There is an unfilled demand for skilled workers. Many paid apprenticeships continue to go unfilled. This is especially true for masonry but also for electric and carpentry.

What current strategies address these needs?

• The City of Knoxville spearheaded the adoption of the 2012 International Green Construction Code, pushing forward safe and sustainable building standards. Other important City initiatives include: becoming a DOE Better Buildings Challenge Partner and pledging to reduce the City’s energy consumption by 20 percent by 2020; partnering with Pathway Lending to provide $10 million for business energy-efficiency projects; winning an IBM Smarter Cities grant to study reducing emergency utility bills through weatherization and education; and, winning a $15 million TVA Extreme Energy Makeover Award to weatherize approximately 1,300 low-income homes.

• KUB’s new Round It Up program, an outcome of the City’s Smarter Cities project, provides a sustainable fund for low-income weatherization. The program, implemented earlier this spring, rounds KUB customers’ bills up to the nearest dollars and uses the funds to improve the area’s aging housing stock. Customers can opt-out, but even if 50 percent do, an estimated $600,000 will be generated annually.

• Working with the City of Knoxville, the E. Tennessee Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) organized a series of education lunch events and a half-day seminar to help the adoption of the 2012 International Green Construction Code. The purpose of the events is to raise awareness through discussion and collaboration and to provide industry workers with strategies to get more information.
Assets- what other current activity can be leveraged to support specific strategies in place?

- The City provides significant leadership in energy efficiency (see strategies above), which could address some local business needs with sufficient planning. There is concern that resultant jobs will not go to local residents, and because many of these programs are funded with one-time grant money, they will contribute to the boom and bust cycle.

- Several area leaders are setting examples and raising awareness about the importance of energy efficiency by constructing green buildings. For example, at UT, new constructions and renovations that cost more than $5 million must meet the minimum requirements of LEED. Some argue that area leaders could bolster leadership by not just meeting LEED standards but also by earning the certification; the certification serves a symbol of their dedication and leadership.

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

- The boom and bust incentive structure creates unstable markets and unsecure jobs. This leaves little room for concrete planning within the industry.

- Compliance with continuously updated green building standards is difficult. Architects, engineers, contractors and others have to provide additional services often with little or no additional fees. Developers, owners, and buyers are resistant to price increases due to greener standards, and codes officials have to be trained to check for additional specs. Uneven compliance and enforcement creates liabilities for all parties involved.

- Green building materials, although decreasing in price overall, are often expensive and have a low return on investment over the short-term. Consumers tend to focus on short-term benefits and have limited knowledge about the multiple and often long-term benefits of energy efficiency.

What are some suggested strategies?

- Prioritize green building and certifications in new developments, especially those at UT, the City, and Knox County (e.g., East Knox County Business Park, Cherokee Farm Innovation Campus, and the Cumberland Avenue Corridor Project).

- Increase awareness among consumers by: showcasing energy efficient systems in buildings (e.g., LED signs that depict energy/water savings); including energy scores on real estate listings; and, implementing marketing campaigns that focus on the apolitical benefits of green building, such as the E. Tennessee Chapter of the USGBC’s successful Green School Initiative, which centered on health benefits.

- Hire additional codes officials who specialize in green construction codes. This would alleviate many of the area code officials who are overburdened by having to learn and enforce additional specs.

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