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## OPINION

# Nashville region is growing at an astonishing pace, and someone has to pay for it | Plazas

David Plazas, Nashville Tennessean Published 5:00 a.m. CT Jan. 31, 2020

*Nashville area growth is going full speed ahead. The region is expected to grow by 60%, from 2 million to 3.23 million people, over the next 25 years. Regional leaders have tough decisions ahead.*

The [Nashville area is the economic engine](#) ([/story/money/2019/09/30/nashville-dominates-job-growth-tennessee/2421770001/](#)) of Tennessee, but local leaders are struggling to catch up with the consequences of the region's popularity.

Record [numbers of tourists](#) ([/story/money/2020/01/27/a-record-16-m-visitors-came-to-nashville-in-2019/4589033002/](#)) and a [nonstop flow of new residents](#) ([/story/news/2020/01/01/moving-nashville-meet-20-your-newest-neighbors/4248857002/](#)) and job seekers every single day are making that work harder.

Leaders are finding that they are facing a difficult truth: Growth is not paying for itself in Middle Tennessee.

They are juggling meeting local needs and municipal services, including schools, police and garbage collection, with trying to live up to Tennessee's low-tax, business-friendly reputation.

Meanwhile, costs for housing, roads and infrastructure are rising and employees, including teachers, police officers and firefighters, [are feeling the crunch](#) ([/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2017/01/29/costs-growth-and-change-nashville/97064252/](#)).

To be sure, growth is a far more enviable position for a city or town than decline, but unmanaged growth [creates strains, not just on services for residents](#) ([/story/money/2019/12/18/nashville-housing-inequity-schools-and-traffic-worry-businesses-too/2674202001/](#)), but on the patience of residents frustrated by longer lines, growing traffic congestion and rising rents that push people with lower or working incomes out of the center of town.

"We're going to have to make some tough decisions going forward," Franklin Mayor Ken Moore said at Franklin Tomorrow's "Breakfast with the Mayors" on Tuesday. Moore also chairs the Regional Council's Mayors Caucus.

**More:** [Reread 'Costs of Growth and Change in Nashville' series](#) ([/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2020/01/30/costs-growth-change-nashville/4605710002/](#)).

## Tax increases should be on the table

Some counties, including [Cheatham](#) ([/story/news/local/cheatham/2019/07/24/cheatham-county-getting-6-tax-increase-heres-what-fund/1809600001/](#)), [Sumner](#) ([/story/news/local/cheatham/2019/08/20/heres-how-sumner-schools-benefits-countys-34-cent-tax-increase/2064048001/](#)), [Rutherford](#) ([/story/news/2019/06/26/property-taxes-go-up-5-7-rutherford-county-commission-decides/1563522001/](#)), [Williamson](#)

[\(/story/news/local/williamson/franklin/2019/07/08/williamson-county-schools-new-state-dollars-lessen-blow-tax-increase/1675678001/\)](#) and [Wilson \(/story/news/local/wilson/2019/09/17/can-wilson-county-tax-increase-help-pay-growth-slow-down/2312969001/\)](#), raised property or other taxes last year to meet the growth demands.

Cities like [Lebanon \(/story/news/local/wilson/2019/11/21/wilson-county-sales-tax-hike-back-ballot-tied-teacher-raises/4254351002/\)](#) and [White House \(/story/news/local/robertson/2020/01/22/what-know-state-white-house-tn/4545333002/\)](#) are weighing or asking voters for a tax increase to pay for services, too.

After the last quadrennial property reappraisal in 2017, Nashville-Davidson County's [property tax rate fell to its lowest level \(https://www.nashville.gov/Finance/Management-and-Budget/Citizens-Guide-to-the-Budget/Documents-and-Resources/Metro-Property-Taxes.aspx\)](#) in the consolidated Metro government's nearly 60-year history.

That decision has come back to haunt Music City, which started the 2019-20 fiscal year without a balanced budget and the [threat of a state takeover \(/story/news/local/2019/11/15/nashvilles-budget-crisis-what-you-need-know/4201676002/\)](#) of its finances.

Mayor John Cooper, Nashville's third mayor since 2017, campaigned on a promise not to raise the property tax rate.

On Monday, however, after his keynote remarks at the Rotary Club of Nashville luncheon, the mayor told reporters [he was leaving the door open \(/story/news/politics/2020/01/29/nashville-budget-mayor-john-cooper-says-property-tax-hike-left-open/4598883002/\)](#) to a tax hike.

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"I want to legitimately go into it and examine what people need and not default to some level of magic, because you're trying to find what the city really needs to be a great city," he said.

Cooper may have no choice. He must ensure the 2019-20 budget is successful, prepare a balanced budget for 2020-21 and get approval from Metro Council.

Council members [tried to approve a property tax increase \(/story/news/2019/06/18/nashville-council-narrowly-rejects-property-tax-increase-adopting-mayor-david-brileys-budget/1492677001/\)](#) in 2018 and 2019, only to fail by one vote each time. This time, new members of the council are more inclined to support an increase and could set up a serious budget fight between them and the mayor's office this year.

Council budget committee Chair Bob Mendes and Vice Chair Kyonztè Toombs are [organizing six community budget meetings \(https://twitter.com/mendesbob/status/1221903867950047233?s=20\)](#) from Feb. 25 to March 12.

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Recall that Mendes took a leading role in trying to increase the tax rate the last two years.

## Are we ready for more than 1 million new residents?

At the Franklin Tomorrow mayors event, Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson presented a slide on growth with the plainly stated facts: The rapid growth is not stopping.

The Nashville region, comprising 14 Middle Tennessee counties, is expected to grow by 1.2 million from now until 2045 — a 60% increase.

That means the region will balloon from about 2 million people today to 3.23 million over the next 25 years.



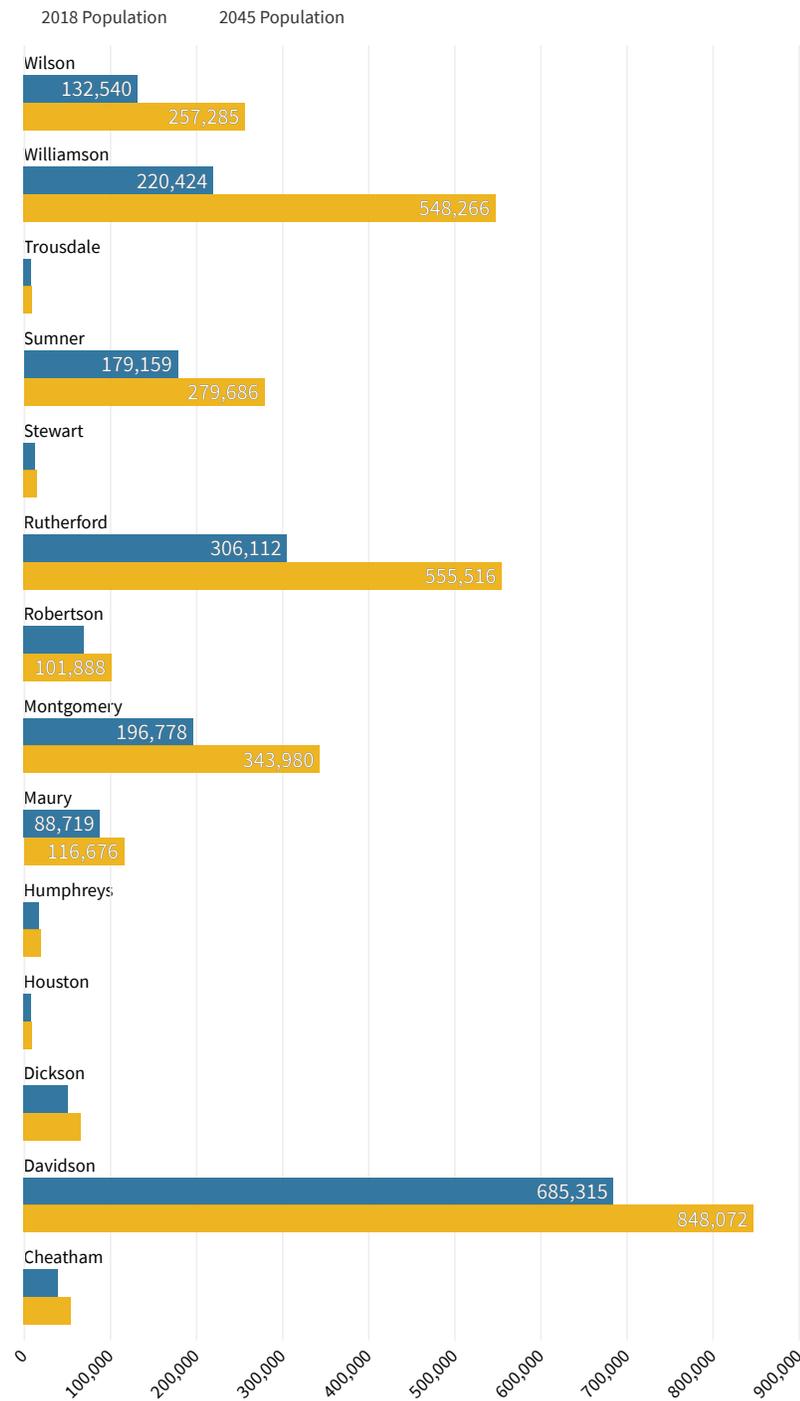
Franklin Mayor Ken Moore, left, Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson and Franklin Tomorrow Executive Director Mindy Tate participate in Franklin Tomorrow's quarterly "Breakfast with the Mayors" on Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020. (Photo: David Plazas/The Tennessean)

Williamson County, Nashville's neighbor to the south, will see the most dramatic rise: from 220,424 people to 548,266 — a 149% increase.

The wealthiest county in Tennessee boasts the best schools in the state but has struggled to keep up with the demand for building more schools. A [sales tax increase \(story/news/local/williamson/2018/02/06/early-voting-early-voting-results-williamson-county-voters-support-sales-tax-hike-pay-down-school/307448002/\)](#) in 2018 helped some. Last year's property tax increase and more funding from that helped some more, but keeping up with demand is a struggle.

"Part of it is the growth. You just can't catch up to it," Anderson said.

## Middle Tennessee population growth



Source: Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson presentation for Franklin Tomorrow (Jan. 28, 2020)

Tennessean.

✳️ A Flourish chart ([https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/1308148/?utm\\_source=showcase&utm\\_campaign=visualisation/1308148](https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/1308148/?utm_source=showcase&utm_campaign=visualisation/1308148))

These are population estimates for other large regional counties (2018 population versus 2045):

- Nashville-Davidson: 685,315 to 848,072 — a 24% increase
- Montgomery: 196,778 to 343,980 — 75% up
- Rutherford: 306,112 to 555,516 — 81% rise
- Wilson: 132,540 to 257,285 — 94% growth

They are all in the same boat. A regional solution that looks decades ahead at costs, growth and resources is essential.

A positive development happened Thursday when the [Greater Nashville Regional Council](https://www.solvehistogether.org/) announced (<https://www.solvehistogether.org/>) that mayors across Middle Tennessee were committed to working together on a unified regional transportation plan in 2020.

This effort deserves support and attention from officials and average citizens alike.

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## What state lawmakers can do

Now that lawmakers are back in session at the Tennessee General Assembly, they have an opportunity to pass laws and promote policies that will help local communities manage growth better.

Some local leaders may be skeptical as legislators have [tended to preempt local ordinances \(story/opinion/2019/08/14/tennessee-preemption-local-laws-lgbtq-rights-police-oversight/1968237001/\)](/story/opinion/2019/08/14/tennessee-preemption-local-laws-lgbtq-rights-police-oversight/1968237001/) ranging from affordable housing mandates to police oversight board subpoena authority.

However, if Middle Tennessee is going to continue to thrive, regions need tools to incentivize more county-to-county cooperation and to share resources. The county line should not be a barrier to deeper collaboration for regional problems.

The landmark [IMPROVE Act of 2017 \(https://www.tn.gov/nexttennessee/improve-act.html\)](https://www.tn.gov/nexttennessee/improve-act.html) to fund multibillion-dollar roads and infrastructure backlogs could be updated to allow for multi-county referendums on transit, for example.

That weakness in the law is one reason why [Nashville's transit referendum failed \(story/news/politics/2018/05/01/nashville-transit-vote-davidson-county-mass-transit/564991002/\)](/story/news/politics/2018/05/01/nashville-transit-vote-davidson-county-mass-transit/564991002/) in 2018.

There are some potential pitfalls for local communities.

The [Beacon Center of Tennessee \(story/news/politics/2020/01/22/tennessee-lawmaker-sponsors-bill-putting-cap-property-tax-hikes/4531953002/\)](/story/news/politics/2020/01/22/tennessee-lawmaker-sponsors-bill-putting-cap-property-tax-hikes/4531953002/) is working on legislation to cap locally elected bodies from enacting property tax increases above a certain threshold — revenue exceeding inflation plus 2% or revenue exceeding inflation plus 6% over three years — unless voters approve a higher amount in a referendum.

Sen. [Mike Bell, R-Riceville \(http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Senate/members/s9.html\)](http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Senate/members/s9.html), plans to sponsor the legislation in the Tennessee Senate.

While the idea is appealing to government skeptics, it could potentially hamstring local leaders who know their local communities best.

It could also place legislators in the unenviable position of having to answer to angry hometown constituents about why their sewer system is outdated, why their roads are not getting fixed or why their police officers are not getting a raise.

Not surprisingly, many city [mayors across Tennessee have decried \(story/news/politics/2020/01/27/tennessee-property-tax-bill-mike-bell/4564363002/\)](/story/news/politics/2020/01/27/tennessee-property-tax-bill-mike-bell/4564363002/) the idea. They were elected to make hard decisions for their residents, after all.

Now would also be a time to start reexamining the tax structure of local municipalities, which looks like a patchwork today. Residents deserve a 21st-century tax structure for modern-day problems.

Local municipalities should be capturing the rewards of growth and reinvesting that money into the community.

Today, they are woefully behind, and the situation will only get worse over time without intentional action and better cooperation.

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