



Smith County Forum



**Sponsored and Facilitated by:
Smith County Office
Texas Cooperative Extension
The Texas A&M University System**

Smith County Forum

Introduction

This report presents the results of the Smith County Forum conducted February 26, 2004 in Tyler. This Forum is part of the Smith County Futures Forum coordinated by the Smith County Extension Office. Such events are being held in every Texas county as part of the Texas Community Futures Forum, a state-wide needs assessment sponsored and facilitated by Texas Cooperative Extension.

Texas Community Futures Forum

County-level involvement in the Texas Community Futures Forum began in January 1999, with Texans from all segments of the population participating. Citizens in every county were asked to study, discuss and define their communities' current and future needs. Because the populations of Texas counties vary widely, within the framework of the Futures Forum a "community" may be a neighborhood, town, county or region.

Texas Cooperative Extension facilitated the partnering of county government, state agencies, organizations, businesses and other groups to gather information about local needs and issues, and then helped organize action teams to address them. This was an ambitious undertaking. It was also a unique opportunity for many groups to work together in meeting the needs of Texans in the 21st Century.

The 2004 Texas Community Futures Forum process builds off of the previous effort to once again gather information about local needs and issues in all 254 counties. This information will be shared with all of Extension's partners and used as the basis for Extension's long-range outreach education plan for 2005–2008. Extension educational programs, which are available to all Texas residents, will be developed in response to community needs and in conjunction with participating partners.

The products and benefits of this process will be many. All of the issues identified locally will be posted on the Internet for county government, state agencies and other organizations and groups to review and use in developing their own strategic plans. The results from all counties will also be compiled and analyzed in light of trend data to create a comprehensive report. This report will be available to all partners in the Texas Community Futures Forum and to others on request. The information will help all groups to more directly focus their activities and resources; it also will reveal areas of common interest in which partnering groups can work together to solve community problems.

Participants in the Smith County Forum

On February 26, 2004, 40 individuals attended the Smith County Forum. They represent a cross-section of county residents, public agencies and businesses in the area. This forum was facilitated by the following individual(s): Brian Triplett, Keith Hansen, Derrick Bruton, Joe Radford, Shelia Lewis. Other(s) supporting this effort included: JoLynn Nerren, Cyndi Phillips.

Purpose of the Smith County Forum

The purpose of the Forum was to solicit and prioritize citizens' opinions about the most important needs and concerns in Smith County. A modified Nominal Group Technique was used to conduct the forum.

The County Forum Agenda

Introductions and Overview: The Forum began with a general session to review the overall agenda, discuss the facilitation process and rules, and pose the question to be considered. Participants were then divided into 3 small groups.

Small Group Session: Participants were asked to respond to the following question:

What are the critical issues facing people in our county over the next five years?

Participants recorded their responses on paper. These items were displayed for all small group participants to see. Items were then grouped and edited by participants to eliminate duplicates and combine similarities. In the last step of the small group session, each person was allocated ten votes (represented by adhesive dots) to be used among the items he or she believed to be the most important. The outcome was a group consensus for the relative importance of the items. The top-ranked items from each small group were reported in the large group session. All items generated in small groups are in appendix 1.

Large Group Session: First, duplicate and similar statements from the 3 groups were edited to eliminate redundancies. Using the voting procedure described above, participants then voted for the items they considered most important.

A final step in the process gave the participants an opportunity to identify entities in the county which are best positioned to work on the issues identified. Participants were asked to respond to the following question:

Which entities (agencies, organizations, community groups, etc.) are positioned to best address these issues?

Information from this step was recorded for each of the top-ranked issues. Results of this part of the process are provided below.

Priority Needs in Smith County Identified by Participants in the County Forum

The following table reports the final rank of items generated by the Smith County Forum.

Table 1: Critical Issues and Entities Identified in Smith County, February 26, 2004.

Rank (Vote)	Description	Entities/Organizations Involved
75	Child and youth services (more and improved).	Parents, Boys and Girls Club, 4-H, Parents Anonymous, YMCA, Parent Services Center, schools, churches, parks and recreation departments, FCCLAs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters and Kids Cafe.
51	Improved, highly-valued educational systems (teacher wages and retention, facilities, drop out rates, school financing).	Parents, schools, Texas Legislature, industries, Chambers of Commerce, school boards, civic organizations, taxpayer organizations, political parties, colleges/universities, churches and media.
48	Economic development (new businesses with quality jobs and pay, especially in north Tyler and Smith County proper).	Tyler Economic Development Council, Chambers of Commerce, Labor Organizations, Airport, City Councils, Commissioners Court, Texas Workforce Center, educational entities and East Texas Council of Government.
37	Criminal Justice (decreasing crime rates and revamping system).	Law enforcement agencies, youth agencies, government, court system, parents, Smith County Bar Association, Crime Stoppers, Childrens Advocacy Center and Restorative Justice.
36	Adult education and workforce training.	Literacy Council, Texas Workforce Commission, Hispanic Service Center, continuing education, schools, Texas Cooperative Extension, libraries, Tyler Junior College, 4-H, media and the East Texas Council of Government.
34	Access to affordable, quality health care for everyone.	Red Cross, doctors, hospitals, insurance companies, government, churches, health departments, Texas Department of Health, St. Paul's Childrens Foundation, Bethesda medical clinic
29	Better understanding and accepting cultural and racial diversity.	schools, parents, churches, media, community leaders, civic groups, law enforcement, judges, organizations and Salvation Army.
22	Plan for growth of the Hispanic population and opportunities for Hispanics.	
22	Senior citizen issues.	
20	Affordable and safe housing.	
17	Improved transportation systems.	
8	Allow prayer in school.	
7	Water quality, planning and conservation.	

Note: Items are the actual and unaltered responses submitted by the participants. Any discrepancy between an item listed here and the same item in the small group listing (see appendices) is due to editing by participants in the general session. The numbers in the Rank

column represents the number of votes participants gave to the corresponding item. Higher numbers denote greater importance.

Future Plans for the Smith County Community Futures Forum

The Futures Forum process gives residents of Smith County the opportunity to identify critical issues that affect them, their families, and their communities. Many local and area agencies and organizations want input from local residents to better focus their activities and resources. Working together, such groups can plan individual, joint or coordinated actions to effectively address a county's or community's critical needs.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Small Group Issues

Note: Small group results are reported here as they were submitted; they have not been edited or changed in compiling this report.

Items Identified by Participants of Small Group(s), Smith County Forum, February 26, 2004.

Small Group #	Vote	Description
1	25	Improved, Highly Valued Educational Systems – Better pay for teachers and teacher recruitment and retention, community and business support, more discipline, reduced school overcrowding, school financing reform.
1	24	Economic Development – quality jobs with quality pay, attracting businesses, skills training, rural high-speed internet access, North vs South Tyler divide, better airline services.
1	16	Plan for Growth of the Hispanic Population / Opportunities for Hispanics.
1	16	Adult Education/Work force Development—Basic literacy, English as a Second Language, GED, Family Literacy, Language Barriers, Hispanic population.
1	13	Improved Transportation Systems – services, traffic lights, speed limits, school zones, congestion.
1	12	Child / Youth Services – summer programs, at-risk youth programs, affordable and quality day care and parenting classes.
1	10	Access to Affordable, Quality Health Care for Everyone – education to community about available resources 'referrals' and diabetes education.
1	7	Planned Growth for Unincorporated sectors around Tyler's new loop.
1	5	Litter Control – public awareness and illegal dumping.
1	5	Family Values—male role models
1	4	Media—need to report more on positive things instead of all negative
1	3	Taxes
1	3	Affordable housing for elderly and first time home buyers
1	3	Services for the homeless
1	3	Good drinking water
1	1	Alternative fuels
2	14	Affordable, accessible health care
2	12	People are not getting enough physical activity
2	9	Programs for children that reaches the largest percentage of people
2	9	Ensuring that we have food for the increasing number of people living within the poverty level

2	9	Economic development—jobs and large industry
2	8	Poverty among senior citizens
2	7	Criminal justice and the need for revamping
2	6	Better care for senior citizens within the community
2	5	Stronger public schools
2	5	A need to develop free recreational facilities for young people
2	5	Need more volunteers in the community
2	4	County-wide parks and recreation system
2	4	Clean water
2	3	Senior citizen county coordinator
2	3	County library system—more available for all citizens county-wide
2	3	Need more community gardens
2	3	Education for child job markets—don't let the youth's high school job be the end point of their quest within the job market or in their pursuit of education
2	2	Better lighting in north Tyler streets
2	1	Increasing need for bilingual services
2	0	Educational programs
2	0	Environment
2	0	Standards
2	0	Medical expense
2	0	Medical education
2	0	Need more jobs
2	0	Affordable housing
2	0	Youth Programs
2	0	Crime
2	0	Need more free opportunities for physical activities—walking paths
2	0	Lack of access for mental health services for all citizens
2	0	Youth and drug issues
2	0	Poor diet with not enough fruit and vegetables
2	0	Lack of medical services for low income citizens—prescription and dental
2	0	access for affordable health care for poor and low income families
2	0	Need affordable hospital plans
2	0	Access to adequate transportation
2	0	Good roads
2	0	Need to identify safe walking routes to schools

2	0	More positive places for kids
2	0	Jobs
2	0	Economic development for northern part of the city and county
2	0	Unification of cultural and economic groups
2	0	High rate of heart diseases
2	0	Educate the public for the need of food bank donations and volunteers
2	0	Equitable education for K–12
2	0	Jobs for anyone who wants one
2	0	Increasing number of overweight kids
2	0	Expanding population
2	0	Inform senior citizens of available resources
2	0	Medical and police station easy access
2	0	Good medical facilities, transportation
2	0	Make more programs for senior citizens and youth programs
3	13	Accessible and Affordable health care for all groups.
3	13	Youth Programs.
3	11	Youth Funding (4–H, FFA, etc.)
3	10	Water Quality Planning and Conservation.
3	10	Affordable, Safe Housing for Families.
3	9	Medical Costs.
3	8	Educated/Trained Work Force.
3	8	Being Open to Cultural and Racial Diversity.
3	6	Sub–standard housing.
3	6	Medical transportation within the county.
3	6	Prayer in school.
3	6	Wage rates (competitive with the rest of the state).
3	5	Expand public transportation, especially in rural areas.
3	5	Affordable housing.
3	4	Job loss.
3	4	English as a second language.
3	4	Assimilation of non–English speaking residents.
3	4	Affordable, accessible, quality child care.
3	3	More jobs created.
3	3	Public transportation.
3	3	Better care for the environment (wildlife).

3	3	Affordable utilities (electricity and propane).
3	3	Emergency preparedness.
3	2	Decline in rural communities.
3	2	Recreational areas, parks and learning centers.
3	2	Family violence.
3	2	Dental and health concerns for low income people.
3	1	Conservation of forests, wetlands, lakes and wildlife.
3	1	Marriage counseling to lessen divorce rate, improve child care, etc.
3	1	Community development.
3	1	Better planning and zoning on rural and urban development.
3	1	Disenfranchisement.
3	0	Livestock facilities.
3	0	Overnight facilities for low income people.
3	0	Help for people in financial trouble.
3	0	Vocational training education training for careers in high school.
3	0	Rising home insurance costs.
3	0	Sewer systems for rural subdivisions, especially on lakes.
3	0	Revise and upgrade county road specifications.