Aging in Place and Smart Growth

Many have noted that a community that works well for children and for seniors is livable for everyone. Smart growth strategies provide significant advantages for older adults-transportation choices, healthy environments, affordable housing opportunities, access to services, social interaction, and more. Advocates for older adults have traditionally focused on critical individual needs for enhancing quality of life, such as home modification strategies and affordable prescription drugs. As the retirement age for the baby boom generation edges nearer, however, community-wide livability is increasingly being recognized as a more sustainable way to enhance quality of life for more people over time.

Sweeping demographic shifts over the next 25 years will entail dramatic changes at the community level. The percentage of older people in our society will climb sharply over the next 25 years. After the baby-boom generation has fully entered what is traditionally considered retirement age, the number of adults over the age of 65 will double in size to make up about 20 percent of our nation's population. The frailer 85-and-over age cohort-the fastest growing segment-will then make up 5 percent of the nation's population.[1] These older people have overwhelmingly and consistently indicated a desire to remain in their own homes as long as they can, in as independent a manner as possible.[2] This phenomenon is known as "aging in place."

Conventional urban design characteristics present significant obstacles to older peoples' independence and social integration. Much of the "graying" trend will be felt in communities that were designed for young families and for people who can drive. According to the Administration on Aging, in 2002 half the population aged 65 and older lived in the suburbs, with about another 27.4 percent in central cities, and 22.6 living in nonmetropolitan areas.[3] These statistics reflect, in part, that the parents of baby boomers remain in the same suburban neighborhoods where they raised their children.

The physical and psychological changes experienced during the process of aging can affect individuals' daily choices and priorities. As people age, their mobility can decline. Disability is not unusual: in 2002, 14 percent of men and 23 percent of women over the age of 65 were unable to walk 2-3 blocks.[4] Although a big yard might once have been their preference, people who now have only limited strength and agility find it difficult to do routine outdoor maintenance, such as mowing the lawn. While a large, single-family house provides valuable privacy and space to a family, it can be a financial and physical burden for older people who are living alone on a limited income. Likewise, large, residential subdivisions that shield families from other uses can also isolate people from their daily needs.

Transportation is a sensitive issue for older people. Many older Americans associate the decision to stop driving with social isolation and a loss of independence. Even if people might not feel perfectly comfortable behind the wheel, they may be reluctant to stop driving if they live in neighborhoods that do not provide other options for getting around. One-fifth of adults aged 65 and older in this country do not drive, and of those, more than half stay home each day, in part because of limited transportation choices.[5] In 2001, nondrivers aged 65 or over experienced 15 percent fewer trips to the doctor, 59 percent fewer trips for shopping and eating out, and 69 percent fewer trips for social, family, and religious reasons than their counterparts who drove.[6] Finally, while seniors use public transit when it is available, only half of Americans aged 65 or older have access to public transportation for their daily use.[7] As older adults stop driving, their ability to meet their critical daily needs is significantly reduced, placing more pressure on public services to meet the need, particularly for lower-income seniors.

Financial security is an important concern. At the present time, a majority of older adults enjoys personal and financial security, social and civic connectedness, and adequate housing, but a smaller number are significantly lacking in these areas. For example, one-third of people aged 65 and older currently lack confidence that their housing will remain affordable as they age.[8] For those who own their own homes, rising property taxes and maintenance costs can be a significant financial burden if they are on a fixed income. The challenge is increased because, as they age, many individuals require home modifications, which can be costly.

Older adults need to remain actively engaged in society. Adults aged 65 and older are already active

supporters of community and stake-holder collaboration in a range of decisions, with the vast majority (85 percent) actively voting in local elections as well as expressing their needs to elected officials and to the police.[9] Often holding positions of leadership, they may also serve the community as volunteers in civic or social organizations, through social activism, by contributing to charity, or through their place of employment. Nineteen percent of seniors provide informal caregiving. Where opportunities for social engagement are lacking or inaccessible, however, individual health and quality of life can suffer. Social isolation can easily result in depression and general health decline among older adults.

Communities need to critically assess their readiness for the "age boom." Today's decisions about the built environment will impact the quality of life of older adults for years to come. Without adequate preparation and foresight, unexpected needs can challenge communities' abilities to maintain quality of life for all residents. Local government and non-profit partners need to engage in proactive and creative problem solving to address future community challenges and to identify win-win solutions.
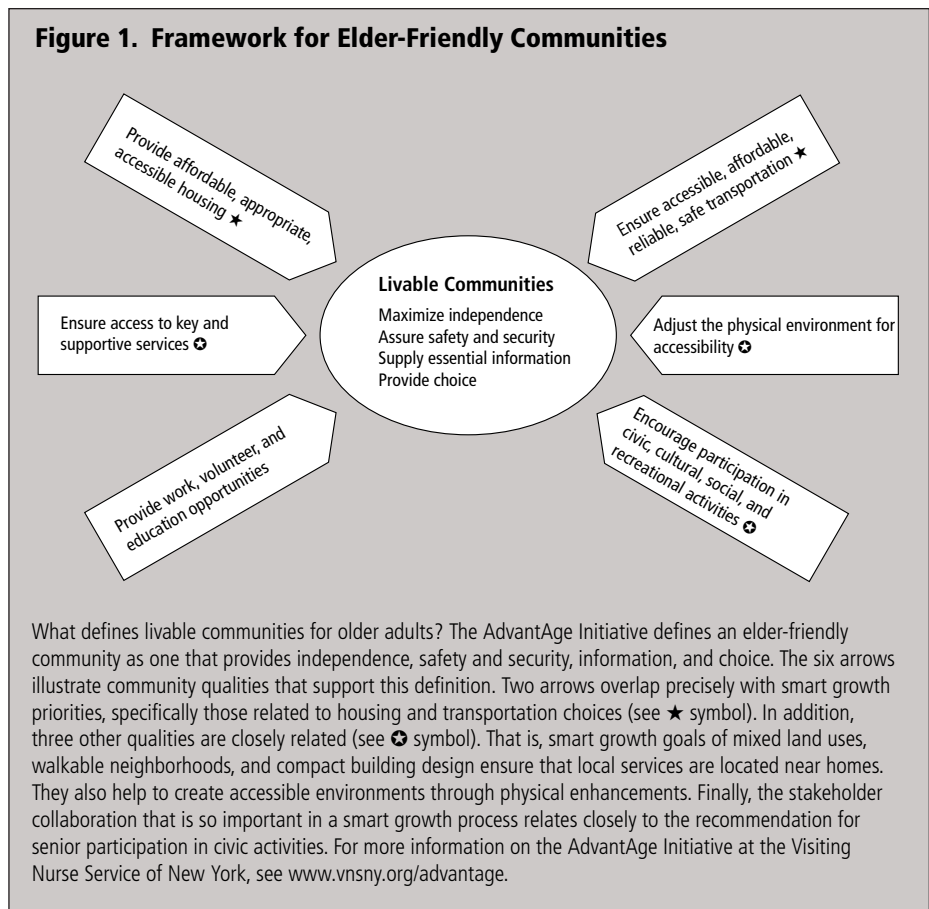
Smart growth approaches answer many seniors' needs. A recent survey identified several transportation-related issues as perceived neighborhood-level problems that can detract from elder-livability. Examples include heavy traffic, limited access to public transportation, and too few and/or too fast traffic lights.[10] Other concerns include: a lack of affordable housing, distance from shopping, and distance from parks. Many smart growth strategies, such as traffic calming, public transit and walkable neighborhoods, as well as mixed land use, compact building design, infill and housing choices, address these problems.

Ideas to Consider

Planning and Coordination. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and Cobb County, Georgia, a suburban community just outside Atlanta, have partnered to develop a comprehensive aging-in-place strategy that will help prepare the county for its rapidly growing older adult population. The team is educating the community about the needs of older residents. At the same time, ARC and Cobb County are analyzing the impact of cur-

Figure 1. Framework for Elder-Friendly Communities

Provide affordable, appropriate, accessible housing ★

Ensure accessible, affordable, reliable, safe transportation ★

Ensure access to key and supportive services ✪

Livable Communities
Maximize independence
Assure safety and security
Supply essential information
Provide choice

Adjust the physical environment for accessibility ✪

Provide work, volunteer, and education opportunities

Encourage participation in civic, cultural, social, and recreational activities ✪

What defines livable communities for older adults? The AdvantAge Initiative defines an elder-friendly community as one that provides independence, safety and security, information, and choice. The six arrows illustrate community qualities that support this definition. Two arrows overlap precisely with smart growth priorities, specifically those related to housing and transportation choices (see ★ symbol). In addition, three other qualities are closely related (see ✪ symbol). That is, smart growth goals of mixed land uses, walkable neighborhoods, and compact building design ensure that local services are located near homes. They also help to create accessible environments through physical enhancements. Finally, the stakeholder collaboration that is so important in a smart growth process relates closely to the recommendation for senior participation in civic activities. For more information on the AdvantAge Initiative at the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, see www.vnsny.org/advantage.

rent county policies on older adults. Using ARC's Aging in Place toolkit, they will examine transportation, housing, in-home services, zoning, infrastructure, and recreational services to develop a set of recommendations on how best to address the primary needs of older adults in Cobb County.[11] The findings will inform ARC's work in other Atlanta-area communities.

Community Involvement and Visioning. Futures Festival is a model for a local intergenerational event aimed at identifying and answering a community's needs. Geared toward youth and older adults, a Futures Festival event provides an opportunity for residents and public officials to share ideas about community development through a variety of media such as murals, models, photographs, theater, games, and other activities. They can focus on specific sites or address community wide concerns.[12]

Policy and Public Education. The City of New Westminster, British Columbia applies a Smart Growth Checklist to any project seeking a zoning amendment or development permit. Developed by staff in consultation with local architects and developers, the Checklist suggests ways to include smart growth concepts and reach stated community goals, including livability for all ages. The Checklist includes important senior-friendly qualities such as: public transportation; housing adaptability,

accessibility, and affordability; pedestrian environment and safety; and proximity to health services, shopping, and parks.[13]

Smart Growth Communities...

Promote a range of housing choices to reflect their residents' varied abilities, independence, and income.   For those who cannot find attractive, affordable housing choices nearby, or who are already in housing that stretches their budgets, moving to a more affordable home may mean leaving a community altogether. The unvaried housing stock and single-use zoning that are common in many communities limit choices for older people who want to remain close to family and friends but who need less living space. To address this concern, communities should critically evaluate zoning codes and subdivision covenants in order to address any unintended barriers that they may place in the way of older people seeking appropriate housing. Existing restrictions can be amended to permit accessory dwelling units or "granny flats" and the subdivision of larger suburban houses into duplexes.[14] Codes can be changed to allow smaller lot sizes, home sharing, construction of additional structures on existing lots, and temporary elder cottages that can increase density while providing additional options for affordable shelter. Finally, adaptive reuse of existing structures can create additional affordable senior housing in urban centers, where services are close by. Besides providing for older residents, these and related smart growth strategies ensure that communities provide a variety of

housing options for the entire life cycle, so that people are not forced to leave their communities as they age.

Facilitate access.   Older adults benefit from a range of neighborhood amenities that enable them to meet their needs, such as: walkable sidewalks and neighborhoods, reliable public transit, and traffic-calmed streets, among others. In fact, as people age, they may shift mode-from driving to transit or walking-or they may vary their behavior to compensate for limitations. Smart growth communities provide that freedom. Compared to the long distances and low densities in many communities, the attributes of smart growth communities-such as mixed uses, compact building design, walkability, and downtown revitalization-facilitate access to a wide variety of daily needs with a minimal amount of driving. It is not surprising, therefore, that denser communities see nearly five times as many older nondrivers out walking on any given day than do areas with more dispersed land use.[15] The qualities of smart growth contribute to an enjoyable walk in the park or a spontaneous visit with neighbors, enable a trip to the store to be combined with several other errands, and may even provide opportunities for affordable housing close to shopping or other needs.

Encourage walking as a means of transportation, social interaction, and individual health.[16]   Walking is a vital transportation option for those who do not drive. Whether it is walking to a transit stop or to a final destination, this easy, free activity enables individuals to age independently. It also contributes to better overall health and psychological well-being and prevents falls and mobility-reducing illnesses such as osteoporosis.[17] Many groups organize group walks as an opportunity for social interaction, so walking can clearly achieve several benefits at the same time. Walkable communities are also safer places for children and families. Walkability requires good street design, sidewalks, and crosswalks.

Provide a quality environment for caregivers.   Those who care for older people, including professionals and family members, need communities where they can live in close proximity to these older adults and still meet their own needs. A 2001 survey found that 44 percent of adults of the baby-boom generation are taking care of their own families, older family members, and, increasingly, other older adults.[18] Nearly one-third of the adults in this situation-particularly Asian Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, especially those with low incomes-feel heavily burdened and may be experiencing stress. Being able to live near the older adults whom they help enables caregivers to run errands for elders or help them with housework with a minimal commute and more time available for their other activities.

Assist in the provision of cost-effective services.   The cost of local government and nonprofit services are affected

by land use, housing, and transportation systems. As seniors age and experience changing needs, they may need help to orient themselves among service providers. They may require frequent or infrequent home assistance, including health care, property maintenance, help with shopping, and other kinds of support. Service provision to a broadly dispersed population is expensive and can force a community to reduce levels of service or even drop services altogether. Denser residential areas can enable service providers to answer several people's needs with less driving. NORCs (naturally occurring retirement communities) provide particularly good opportunities for service providers—from meals on wheels to paratransit services (or on-demand bus service)—to deliver assistance to numerous people at one time. Because of economies of scale, service providers that are located close to both shopping and residences can provide a broader range of services to more people on a regular basis. Mixed land uses also allow older residents to address several needs in a single trip and can facilitate social interactions in daily activities.

Provide flexible options for a diverse aging population.
To maintain older residents' dignity, avoid costly overprovision of local services, and ensure that communities are livable for everyone, it is critical that communities recognize that people experience aging in different ways. Inclusive and elder-friendly communities enable people to stay independent as long as possible and provide a series of supportive services that can be combined to meet changing individual needs in housing, transportation, services, and shopping, as they are needed.

Conclusion

Smart growth communities enable older adults to enjoy independent, healthy lives. As older adults make up an increasing share of this nation's population, and communities begin to experience shifts in priorities, smart growth provides a holistic framework for meeting those evolving needs while also providing a community that is livable for all ages. Advocates for older adults and smart growth proponents should therefore work together to craft lasting solutions on the community level. Certainly, their goals are aligned. Hopefully, a common set of assumptions can assist diverse community groups and local government staff to better provide for older people's needs, and will encourage caregivers and advocates for older adults to reach out to supporters of smart growth strategies.

1 Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, Older Americans 2004: *Key Indicators of Well-Being* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. November 2004), www.agingstats.gov/chartbook2004/default.htm.

2 Penny H. Feldman et al., "A Tale of Two Older Americas: Community Opportunities and Challenges" (New York: Visiting Nurse Service of New York, Center for Home Care Policy and Research, April 2004), www.vnsny.org/advantage/AI_NationalSurveyReport.pdf.

3 Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans: 2003* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, 2003), http://research.aarp.org/general/profile_2003.pdf.

4 Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, Older Americans 2004: *Key Indicators of Well-Being* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. November 2004), www.agingstats.gov/chartbook2004/default.htm.

5 Linda Bailey, *Aging Americans: Stranded Without Options* (Washington, D.C.: Surface Transportation Policy Project, April 2004), www.transact.org/report.asp?id=232.

6 Ibid. This statistic disproportionately affects seniors living in low-density areas including small towns and rural communities.

7 Ibid.

8 Penny H. Feldman et al, "A Tale of Two Older Americas," 27.

9 Elisabeth Simantov and Mia R. Oberlink, "When Older Adults Are Involved in a Community, the Benefits Are Mutual" (New York: Visiting Nurse Service of New York, Center for Home Care Policy and Research, March 2004), www.vnsny.org/advantage/fact/AI_FS_Involvement.pdf.

10 Penny H. Feldman et al., "A Tale of Two Older Americas," 7.

11 M. Scott Ball, Aging in Place: A Toolkit for Local Governments (Atlanta: Atlanta Regional Commission and Community Housing Resource Center, n.d.). www.atlantaregional.com/qualitygrowth/Aging_In_Place_Tool.pdf. Also see www.atlantaregional.com/qualitygrowth/toolkit.html#aging.

12 For more information about conducting a Futures Festival, see facilitator's guide at http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/Futures.pdf.

13 See: http://www.city.new-westminster.bc.ca/cityhall/planning/06publications/zoning_dev.html

14 For more discussion of these issues see Deborah Howe, *Aging and Smart Growth: Building Aging-Sensitive Communities*, Translation Paper no. 7, (Miami: Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, December 2001). www.fundersnetwork.org/usr_doc/aging_paper.pdf.

15 Bailey, *Aging Americans*.

16 See Eric Feldman, *Active Living for Older Adults: Management Strategies for Healthy and Livable Communities*, (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 2003). http://icma.org/activeliving.

17 *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1996).

18 AARP, *In the Middle: A Report on Multicultural Boomers Coping with Family and Aging Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Belden, Russonello, & Stewart; Great Falls, Va.: Research/Strategy/Management, July 2001), http://research.aarp.org/il/in_the_middle.pdf.

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