Demographers tell us our population is “aging in place.” Generally, we are getting older, living longer, and not moving around much. There will always be retirees who travel or migrate to other climes, but most people are staying in the communities where they have their roots. They are prime candidates for you to actively engage in the planning process.

The focus of this discussion is on retirees in your community. Seniors who are still employed have more in common with their younger working peers. Non-employed older adults often have the time and the interest to be involved in local planning efforts. Reaching and engaging them is both a challenge and an opportunity for your planning board.

The challenge in dealing with retirees is, first, to realize their worth. If they have lived in your community any length of time, they know its history and what may or may not have worked in the past. Certainly, times change, but it would be helpful if you had the benefit of being apprised of any planning issues that aroused controversy previously. That does not mean you might not want to consider them anyway, but, forewarned, you may be able to take a different, less contentious, approach.

Another challenge is to find the retirees and then make the effort to meet and greet them on their own turf. In previous columns, we have stressed the importance of taking your planning show on the road regularly and talking with community groups about the value of good planning as well as specific projects. People in senior centers and retirement communities should be on this list. They are eager for outside speakers and often very savvy about what is going on.

A few accommodations will make communication more satisfactory. If older citizens will be the majority of the attendees, schedule at least some of your meetings in the daytime, as many are reluctant to go out or drive after dark. For their easy reading, reproduce handouts or explanatory material in larger than normal print. If you are making a presentation in even a medium-sized room, use a microphone.

It is a common stereotype that older people as a group oppose change or new taxes. Take that as another challenge by trying to understand their interests.

Considering new zoning regulations? Appeal to their pride as citizens by showing how the proposals will enhance the livability of the community and increase the value of their homes. Recognize their self interest as grandparents by showing how changes will benefit the younger generation. Ask their advice about their priorities and try to accommodate them. You may be pleasantly surprised about how unselfish and open-minded they can be.

For your next workshop or public event, invite young people from a nearby high school to bring their grandparents or older friends. Encourage a dialogue between the generations and the results can have long-range, positive results. For example, when planning a new park, if you consider the needs of older citizens for benches and rest areas, they may be more inclined to support kiddie play areas and ball fields.

Older residents can also be valuable members of a planning board. Every commission benefits from having a healthy mix of ages and interests. If yours does not currently include an older citizen, find one who is willing to be involved when you have your next vacancy. Retired realtors, contractors, architects, engineers, teachers, union leaders, and others are more likely than younger people to have the time and dedication to devote the many hours it takes. If you have a citizens advisory board or special subcommittees, consider retirees for those positions as well.

Show retirees they still count by tapping into their wisdom and availability and you are likely to be delighted about how much you can count on them.

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Elaine Cogan’s “Tip of the Month”

Receive by email a “Tip of the Month” for planning commissioners written by PCJ columnist Elaine Cogan. Each tip is short and to the point. For more information about this free service and to subscribe, go to: www.plannersweb.com/tips.html
“While conducting a recent focus group of elderly drivers, Dr. Jean Shope, a research professor at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, discovered a curious thing: ‘Some people in the group said they’d rather die than give up driving,’ she says.”

The above quote is from a feature story on issues facing senior drivers published in the November/December 2004 issue of the American Automobile Association’s AAA World magazine.¹ Concerns about our reliance on private automobiles, especially as we age, is a topic planning commissioners are facing with increasing frequency.

I can relate. Living in our old family farmhouse, I have an easy 10-minute drive to the grocery store, a 20-minute commute to work, and travel less than half an hour to see friends or dine out. It’s heavenly. But how would I cope if I couldn’t drive?

Like other baby boomers, I still have a few years to figure out my options. But this is a concern many of our parents — and some of you reading this — already face. According to a recent report from the Surface Transportation Policy Project, more than one in five Americans age 65 and older do not drive because of declining abilities, concern over safety, or lack of access to a car.² And more than half of this group (some 3.6 million people) stay home on any given day, in large part because they lack transportation options.

Seniors who have access to public transportation regularly use it; they made some 310 million transit trips in 2001. But half of all adults — many in rural areas and small towns — have no bus service.

Elderly Americans who don’t drive make 15 percent fewer trips to the doctor and 59 percent fewer shopping and restaurant trips than those who use a car. While drivers go out for social purposes about eight times per week, non-drivers only go out about three times a week. And a recent survey of older adults found that many are self-conscious about asking for rides, citing feelings of dependency and concerns about imposing on others. The resulting social isolation erodes emotional well-being, which in turn contributes to physical malaise.

We know that moderate exercise provides significant health benefits for the elderly, so it’s encouraging to hear that more than half of America’s seniors walk regularly. But again, the difference between city and country dwellers is striking: one in three older non-drivers who live in dense areas walk on any given day, compared to one of every fourteen in low-density places. Given the growing national cost of senior health care, these are important statistics.

What about those four out of five seniors who do still drive? The Federal Highway Administration says there are about 19 million licensed drivers aged 70 and older in the U.S., a remarkable 111 percent increase from 20 years ago.³ By 2020, there will be more than 50 million Americans over 65, almost all of them licensed to drive.

Are they safe? Yes and no. Although seniors account for fewer than three percent of all crashes, partly because they drive fewer daily miles after retirement, their risk of severe injuries and death grows with age. The fatality rate among drivers aged 85+ is nine times higher than for drivers aged 25 to 69.

The AAA notes that 90 percent of driving skill is vision-related, a serious concern for drivers with cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and other eye diseases. Decreased strength and flexibility can slow down reaction times and make it hard to check blind spots. And even a slight slowdown in cognitive abilities can make a difference in the split-second decisions we have to make when driving. These factors help explain why older drivers are much more likely than other drivers to be involved in crashes at intersections, especially when making left turns.

Organizations like AAA and state DMVs are making many efforts to help older drivers assess their skills and learn safe driving techniques. What can planners and public officials do to make driving conditions safer for seniors, and to make it easier for them to live a good life without needing a car of their own? Three key solutions include better public transit, safer street design for drivers and pedestrians, and coordinated planning with those who understand the needs of the elderly.

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¹ “Keys to Independence,” by Alicia Abell (AAA World, November/December 2004; available online at <www.aaworld.com>). The focus group findings are reported by Jean Shope & David Eby in “Improvement of Older Drivers Through Self-Evaluation: Focus Group Results” (University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, 1998).


³ Our Nation’s Highways—2000, Federal Highway Administration, Office of Highway Policy Information.
1. Expand the Range and Flexibility of Public Transit

Seniors’ travel patterns are different than those of commuters. They need transit in the middle of the day, at night, and on Sundays. Getting on and off buses, or up and down subway stairs, can be difficult. And their needs change with factors such as the weather – it may be easy to walk a slow half-mile to the bus stop on a sunny day, but navigating that distance in the rain can be a whole different story. Flexible, door-to-door services such as jitneys and volunteer driver programs have to be part of the transit system if it’s going to work for seniors.

Communities can get help planning and funding these kinds of systems from sources such as the Federal Transit Administration’s “Specialized Transportation for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities” (Section 5310) and “United We Ride” programs. The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration and groups such as the American Public Transit Association and the Community Transportation Association of America offer a wealth of information. Also, the U.S. DOT can help transit agencies install “Intelligent Transportation System” technology such as dispatching systems that enable them to re-route vans on the road in response to calls, greatly reducing the typical 24-hour advance reservation requirement, and allowing for more cost-effective groupings of passengers.

Local agencies are working to fill transit gaps. For example, “Neighbor Ride” in Howard County, Maryland, modeled after the successful PasRide program in Pasadena, California, provides ride reservations for seniors 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The United Way of Fort Madison in southeast Iowa recently piloted a program to provide elderly residents with taxi vouchers. In Charlottesville, Virginia, a group of social service agencies and the regional planning council created JAUNT, a public service transit corporation owned by five local governments that serves people with disabilities and the elderly.

2. Make Streets Safe for Senior Drivers and Pedestrians

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) “Guidelines and Recommendations to Accommodate Older Drivers and Pedestrians” helps local and state engineers improve a host of street features such as signs, lighting, crosswalks, pedestrian signals, and intersections. Detroit recently improved about 140 intersections with larger signs, brighter stoplights, and more left-turn lanes – resulting in 35 percent fewer crashes among senior drivers.

Pedestrian planning and funding programs are beginning to broaden, ranging from FHWA’s transportation safety and enhancement programs to public health grants (such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s “Active Living by Design” program). As with driver safety, pedestrian system improvements for seniors, such as median refuges in multi-lane streets and longer crossing times at signalized intersections, are designed to help those with reduced agility.

3. Coordinate Plans for Transportation, Housing, and Human Services

The most cost-effective way to ensure mobility for seniors is to reduce the need for long trips to get to various places by creating walkable communities in which they can afford to live. It’s much easier to help seniors use buses and walk in mixed-use, transit-friendly neighborhoods – whether suburban or in-town – than in sprawling areas with widely separated activities.

Agencies such as senior centers need to be involved in transportation planning and community design, helping planners establish standards for barrier-free (“universal”) buildings and develop a mix of housing prices and types that enable seniors to live in easily accessible areas. Meanwhile, the need for housing that is affordable to elderly people is growing fast. Some groups of seniors are coming up with creative solutions like investing in small “co-housing” communities in which a single home or set of adjacent units is designed to combine private living spaces with common kitchens and recreational areas. Residents maintain

their independence while enjoying the company and security of nearby friends, as well as pooling funds for housecleaning and sharing a car or taxi services. And co-housing arrangements don’t have to be age-limited; multi-generational communities encourage a rich variety of relationships that benefit old and young alike.

Planners who dig the collective wisdom of senior residents and social service providers are on track to making their community a healthy place for everyone, young and old. As medical science offers us unprecedented opportunities for longer lives, the challenge is to ensure those years are not a lonely burden, but a welcome opportunity to develop new activities and relationships that enrich ourselves and our communities.

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The Impact of an Aging Population on Planning

C. Gregory Dale, FAICP

We can reasonably assume that as people age, some will choose (either by preference or by necessity) to consider alternatives to the single-family detached house on a large lot. Housing and lawn maintenance will become increasingly difficult or undesirable for many aging people. Yet, single-family housing remains the style most prevalent in suburban communities.

We are already seeing market demand for alternative housing options. For example, what the housing industry calls “lifestyle housing,” consisting of high amenity single-family homes on small lots, often with common maintenance, has already begun to enter the market. We also witnessed an initial surge in assisted and congregate living housing in recent years. While this slowed down due to overbuilding, we can expect that this market will get hot again as the aging baby-boomer process continues. Communities will need to be prepared to deal with a diverse range of housing products.

At the same time, experience shows that any house style other than detached single-family often faces local opposition and controversy. The challenge for communities is to determine whether they want to provide housing options enabling life-long residents to remain in the community as they age, or whether these residents will be forced to find housing elsewhere.

1. Housing Choices

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2. Land Use

The location and mix of housing relative to other uses is a related issue. Will

1. The current draft plan is available on Arizona’s Department of Economic Security web site: <www.de.state.az.us>, then search under Aging & Elderly /Governor’s Advisory Council on Aging.

2. There are a number of terms used to describe the growing variety of senior housing arrangements. “Congregate housing” generally means independent living in separate apartments, with opportunities to share activities and meals with other residents. Many “senior apartments” also offer services and opportunities for residents to participate in activities together. “Assisted living” facilities typically provide three meals a day, supervision of medications, and access (often on-site) to skilled nursing and medical care.
graying baby-boomers continue to want to live in communities where the automobile is necessary for every activity? Should cities and towns explore mixed uses that allow seniors the opportunity to experience community life without getting in the car?

There is a growing interest in rethinking the way in which we have segregated land uses from one another, and encouraging modern versions of mixed use towns centers where people can shop, work, recreate, and learn in a neighborhood environment. Many people feel that the aging population trend has the potential to fuel additional interest in this as more baby boomers look for alternative living arrangements.

Senior housing provided by nonprofits and public agencies for low- and moderate-income residents has often been located in downtown areas – recognizing the advantages of proximity to health and social service agencies, public transit, and other activities. As wealthier baby-boomers age, cities – and developers – are increasingly promoting downtown living for this group for many of the same reasons, not to mention having restaurants and cultural attractions within walking distance.

For many cities this also ties in to an interest in strengthening their downtowns. In San Diego, for example, 5,000 people moved into downtown in the last five years, bringing the total residential population to over 20,000. Estimates are this number will reach 80,000 by 2030. And many will be aging “empty nesters.”

3. Transportation Options

As people age there will be more interest and demand for alternative transportation modes. This is explored more fully in Hannah Tweddell’s article in this issue. From a community perspective, the importance of designing for “walkability” or pedestrian comfort is also important. The quality of sidewalks, the safety of street openings, the provision of pedestrian amenities, and the sense of security provided, all contribute to the “friendliness” of communities for pedestrians.

THE CHALLENGE FACING COMMISSIONERS

What can planning commissions expect as a result of the demographic trend of an aging population? There are several things to watch for:

- As the trend heats up, you can expect to see more density being requested as part of senior housing projects.
- Some of these requests will be controversial, particularly if they occur in areas that are traditionally single-family.
- Unless your zoning code is updated to account for new types of housing uses, the traditional categories of single-family, multi-family, and nursing homes will make it difficult to accommodate new kinds of senior housing.

Communities will need to think through a broad range of issues associated with aging. As a planning commissioner, you will likely face the challenge of balancing the needs of an aging population with the views of those in your community resistant to accommodating new, and some times denser, senior housing developments.

C. Gregory Dale is a Principal with the planning and zoning firm of McBride Dale Clarion in Cincinnati, Ohio, and a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. He manages planning projects and also regularly conducts training for planning officials.

On-Line Comments

“In Dearborn County, Indiana, retirees have often become county activists. In the past they have researched and improved county road maintenance processes (pushing for widening and striping rural roads for safer night time driving). They have highlighted areas where taxes are being wasted, they have worked to improve sanitary sewer accessibility, and some have worked to enlighten politicians on past practices.

Retirees can often bring expertise from their previous jobs. They also probably have the advantage of no longer having any conflict of interest with projects in the jurisdiction, if they are retired from architecture, realty, or construction interests … My husband is a geriatrician – he can attest to the fact that there are many vibrant elderly citizens in our communities. There are also quite a few whose minds are sharp, and with a few accommodations, they can still be assets to their communities.”

– Christine Mueller, Lawrenceburg (Dearborn County), Indiana

“The kinds of transportation improvements that benefit the elderly also benefit other segments of society – the young, the disabled, and those without access to a car. (And, many of us regular folks, who are not elderly but sure appreciate the internally illuminated street signs at night!).

Also, changes in land use patterns, such as promoting elderly housing closer to the city center, would result in better access to existing transit systems and better pedestrian opportunities.”

– Wendy Grey, AICP, Wendy Grey Land Use Planning, Tallahassee, Florida

“The P&Z Commission I serve on is very lucky to have ‘seasoned’ members as well as lots of input from our community’s ‘seasoned citizens.’ Their input is invaluable and helps to provide a ‘complete’ look at some of the challenges that we face as a commission and as a community.”

– Charles Sprague, Planning & Zoning Commissioner, Sachse, Texas

“There are significant problems with transit availability outside central cities. Suburban fixed routes are not just infrequent in the off peak, they are also poorly coordinated in most large suburbs, with buses not timed to meet at transfer centers … Paratransit or dial-a-ride systems in most locations are inefficient and many push for advance reservations. The most efficient paratransit systems are those that take calls like a taxi company. However, some operators are actually concerned that if they provide convenient service they’ll get inundated and not have enough vehicles and drivers.”

– Dan Benson, PE, AICP, Daniel Benson & Associates, Oceanside, California

3 According to San Diego’s Centre City Development Corporation, the City’s downtown redevelopment agency.