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CREATING LIFELONG COMMUNITIES IN THE ATLANTA REGION

By Laura Keyes, AICP, Atlanta Regional Commission

CONNECTING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT TO AGING IN PLACE

Over the next 20 years, the older adult population in metro Atlanta will grow from one in ten to one in five. Even now, the Atlanta region has many individuals reaching their senior years living far from transit and services because of spread-out development patterns typical to the area. Yet healthy, active aging requires communities where people can live throughout their lifetime. Either the built environment can support aging in place and independent living for as long as possible, or it can create barriers when the needs of older adults are not taken into consideration in how we design and plan our communities. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has acted by facilitating the Lifelong Communities Initiative, a place-based approach to creating communities where older adults can age in place and age well. The Lifelong Communities Initiative and framework pursue three goals: promoting housing and transportation options, encouraging healthy lifestyles, and expanding access to services.

In a recent survey prepared for ARC by the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute, 64 percent of the region's 55 and older population said they plan to remain in their homes as long as possible. The survey also indicated that 88 percent of older adults currently drive themselves, and over 57 percent did not know how they would get around when they could no longer drive. ARC's research emphasizes the link between the relationship of the built environment (i.e., the physical infrastructure) and the ability of older adults to maintain independence and freedom as they age. The National Institute of Environment Health Sciences broadly defines the built environment as "environments that are human modified, including homes, schools, workplaces, highways, urban sprawl, and air pollution" [1]. The Atlanta region's conventional suburban built environments present significant challenges to meeting older residents' needs for independence and freedom due to the absence of pedestrian friendly options, automobile-oriented development patterns, and the lack of multiple mobility options to access basic services from home to the broader community.

LIFELONG COMMUNITIES: AN INNOVATIVE FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE BETTER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

To realize the Lifelong Community concept for the Atlanta region more fully and to provide examples for what Lifelong Communities can look like, ARC sponsored a nine-day charrette in February 2009. This intensive design workshop brought together a broad range of professionals and local citizens with the internationally recognized planning and architecture firm Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company to explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and create consensus around a community vision and plan. In all, six master plans were developed for sites around the Atlanta region incorporating strategies that demonstrate how new development and retrofitted suburban communities can support people of all ages. The Lifelong Communities Charrette produced a set of seven core principles that go into making a lifelong community:

Connectivity: Providing the most options for getting from one place to another, reducing traffic, and creating a viable street network for multiple modes of transportation.

Pedestrian Access and Transit: Creating a vibrant streetscape, destinations worth walking to, connected and safe sidewalks, and transit, both within the community and to regional hubs.

Neighborhood Retail and Services: Permitted within walking distances of housing to reduce auto travel, increase walkability, and provide for sustainable community hubs.

Social Interaction: Resulting from the provision of adequate green space, community centers, neighborhood gardens, and more.

Diversity of Dwelling Types: Allowing individuals to remain within the community as their needs and preferences change.

Healthy Living: Growing out of an environment that promotes physical activity (trails and bike paths), neighborhood-scale groceries offering fresh fruits and vegetables, and health clinics and medical offices within walking distance.

Consideration for Existing Residents: Providing options for existing residents to remain in the community as redevelopment occurs.

As both the Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Area Agency on Aging, ARC has helped shape how we grow as a region and how we meet the needs of older residents for more than 40 years. Since the charrette, eight cities and counties in the region have successfully implemented a wide range of programs and policies that incorporate the goals of a Lifelong Community. ARC has also institutionalized Lifelong Community principles by integrating them into **Plan 2040**, the region's transportation and regional development plan, and the Livable Centers Planning Grants Program. Based on the principles of Lifelong Communities and smart growth, ARC works with communities to develop places that are fully accessible, from inside the dwelling, down the street, and into the doctor's office, restaurant, park, or store.

The Lifelong Communities Initiative recognizes that the way a community is planned and designed impacts the mobility needs of older adults and persons with disabilities. For example, greater connectivity of the street network lessens the reliance on the personal vehicle to achieve transportation independence. In addition, a lack of sidewalks, destinations, and meeting spaces limits opportunities for social interaction and physical exercise. Finally, traditional suburban zoning that separates uses typically locates retirement communities on the edge of town and creates barriers to efficient service delivery by not allowing housing, retail, commercial, and medical facilities within close proximity of one another.

TOOLS TO MAKE THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT WORK AT THE LOCAL LEVEL
Mableton, a suburban community of 23,000, 15 miles northwest of downtown Atlanta, recognizes that good community design is a vital component of healthy aging. In collaboration with the **Mableton Improvement Coalition**, ARC launched Lifelong Mableton and began discussions with the local county planning staff to foster development in Mableton in ways that support healthy aging in place. To this end, the county set aside funds to work with the community to develop a new standard in zoning, known as form-based code.

Form-based code is far more flexible than strict, reactive zoning regulations and traditional suburban zoning patterns that create a separation of uses. The code focuses on the design of the building versus the use of the building and integrates concepts of livable, walkable communities. Mableton's new code allows for a variety of housing types and densities and, through incentives, encourages the development of mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly developments, thereby supporting Mableton's goals for the development of a live-work-play community. The citizens of Mableton, with the leadership of the Cobb County government, participated in a local seven-day charrette process to provide input on building design standards, the relationship between development and pedestrian infrastructure, and the scale of the buildings for this community. Ultimately, the county's Board of Commissioners, by a 5-0 vote, adopted the new zoning code as a means to redevelop Mableton's core.

Since Lifelong Mableton, ARC has worked closely with seven other communities in the Atlanta region to replicate policies and best practices for creating Lifelong Communities. Three local governments adopted resolutions supporting Lifelong Communities Principles of Good Design, demonstrating strong political support and the establishment of new multi-disciplinary stakeholder committees resulting in greater collaboration among local officials and residents. Implementation activities in other communities have led to multiple community-based walkability assessments, better sidewalks and safer intersections, zoning code changes, senior housing ordinances, new community gardens and farmers' markets, and healthy living initiatives. It is through these efforts that the Lifelong Communities Initiative is developing local comprehensive approaches to the growing aging population.

[1] James Hill, Ph.D., "**Addressing the Environment to Reduce Obesity**," *National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences.* N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.

Laura Keyes, AICP, Community Development Manager, Lifelong Communities, Aging Services Division

Laura Keyes manages the Atlanta Regional Commission Lifelong Communities Planning Initiative. She is president for the Georgia Planning Association and is an AICP-certified planner. She holds a Bachelors of Science from the University of Michigan, a Masters of Science from the School of Agriculture at Michigan State University, and a Certificate in Aging through the Institute for Geriatric Social Work from the Boston University School of Social Work. She is a graduate of both the Regional Leadership Institute's Class of 2010 and Leadership DeKalb's Class of 2012. She recently published her work on Lifelong Communities in Atlanta in the Journal of Physical and Occupational Therapy in Geriatrics.

AAF was pleased to have Laura lend her expertise and experience to our 2012 Design for Aging Forum.

Featured rendering of Mableton Plaza courtesy of Laura Keyes.

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