

Atlanta Regional Commission's Lifelong Communities Initiative: Creating Communities for All Ages and Abilities

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The Atlanta region is experiencing a monumental demographic shift. By 2030, one out of every five residents will be over the age of 60. The region's housing and transportation infrastructure is not ready to support the changing needs and preferences of a growing older adult population. Getting healthy and staying healthy is increasingly difficult in communities with limited access to basic health services and too few opportunities for walking, exercise, good nutrition, and recreation. Older adults and those who care for them do not have the necessary information or support to make decisions about their future. This paper examines Lifelong Communities, the approach of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)¹ to transform communities into places people can live throughout their lifetimes. Combining planning, community organizing, and policy reform among all levels of government, ARC is testing new models that create housing and transportation options and improve access to health and wellness services.

To help local communities prepare for the time when one in five residents of the region is over 60, ARC is working with stakeholders in the Atlanta metropolitan area to help them identify strategies that promote housing and transportation options, encourage healthy lifestyles, and expand access to services.

Lifelong Communities: Places People Can Live Throughout Their Lifetimes

The rapid growth in the Atlanta region's older adult population is demanding new and diverse housing options, transportation alternatives, and community designs that promote active living. Surveys of older adults reveal that most want to stay in the communities in which they've lived for years, even when they look to downsize. However, current land use policy and development patterns in the Atlanta region do not provide the housing and transportation choices that older adults need to live healthy, independent lives.

As both the Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Area Agency on Aging, the Atlanta Regional Commission has helped shape how the region grows and meets the needs of older residents for more than 40 years. To help local communities prepare for the time when one in five residents of the region is over 60 years of age, ARC developed the Lifelong Communities Initiative. ARC is working with stakeholders in all 10 counties

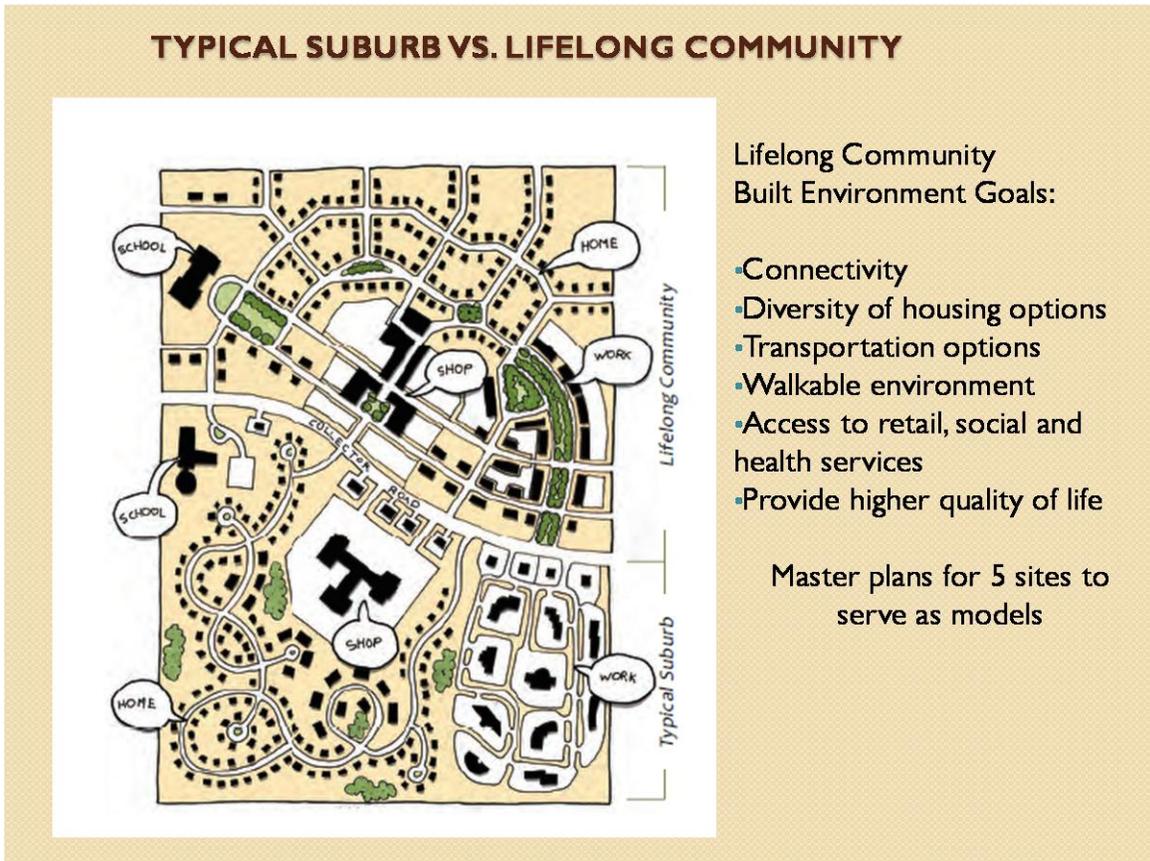
¹ The Atlanta Regional Commission is the regional planning and intergovernmental coordination agency for the city of Atlanta and the 10-county Atlanta area, including Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry and Rockdale counties.

in the Atlanta metropolitan area to help them identify strategies to (1) promote housing and transportation options, (2) encourage healthy lifestyles, and (3) expand access to services. A key focus is creating the interagency and interdepartmental partnerships that can support change. Through such partnerships, communities are able to challenge old assumptions and find creative solutions to facilitate aging with dignity and independence.

To more fully realize the Lifelong Community concept for the Atlanta region 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, local citizens, and the internationally recognized planning and architecture firm Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) and Company to explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and create consensus around a community vision and plan. 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 throughout their lifetimes. As a result, ARC, which represents 78 local governments in the 10-county Atlanta region, adopted the Lifelong Communities Initiative as regional policy, committing to incorporate the needs of older adults in every aspect of planning and encouraging other local governments to do the same. The Lifelong Communities Charrette produced seven core principles for 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

In the Atlanta region, the vast majority of neighborhoods built over the last 50 years represent conventional suburban development. The following illustration showing typical suburban design versus a lifelong community demonstrates the lack of connectivity. Opportunities to walk to school or shopping are limited, and almost every trip requires a car. To create a Lifelong Community, planners and developers must address the needs of the older adult population in the design of social spaces, recreation, streetscapes, retail and residential buildings, and transportation options.



Source: DPZ and Company for ARC's Lifelong Community Charrette

Following the Lifelong Communities Charrette, ARC received a U.S. Administration on Aging demonstration grant under its Community Innovations for Aging in Place program, one of 13 grants awarded nationwide. In 2009, Mableton, an unincorporated community in South Cobb County, was funded through this grant and became the first community to begin to implement the principles that grew out of the charrette. Mableton has a high concentration of older adults, strong civic will, and a demonstrated commitment from local government officials.

Today, ARC is taking Lifelong Communities region-wide. Over the last three years, 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 integrated Lifelong Community principles into Plan 2040, the region's transportation and regional

development plan, as well as ARC's Livable Centers Planning Grants Program, allowing for institutionalization of policies and programs.

A key element of Lifelong Communities is the promotion of transportation options and walkable communities for older adults and persons with disabilities so they can live independently in their communities for as long as possible. ARC provides an umbrella of programs and policy and design guidelines that communities can use to ensure that the needs of older adults and persons with disabilities are considered in state, regional, and local transportation planning, operations, and programs and community design. ARC's Senior Mobility Program is a menu of locally led transportation options that a community can implement based on needs, funding opportunities, and other resources. The core components of the program include travel training, volunteer driver programs, transportation vouchers, walkability assessments and local shuttles and circulators.

The initiative seeks to integrate the needs of an aging population into all levels of service, health, and infrastructure. 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. Extensive collaboration among local governments and community stakeholders, cultivated relationships within the community, and local ownership of the concepts demonstrate the initiative's success.

The effort is validated by the results of the initial Lifelong Mableton Pilot Project, whose plans are no longer on shelves but in the hands of its residents. Lifelong Mableton has developed the tools for creating change: a local charrette where residents identified the most valued assets of their community, a handbook for city and county planners and government officials to implement the principles of Lifelong Communities, and a walking assessment survey to be performed by community members. These tools resulted in a form-based code to encourage housing options and a more walkable community. Additionally, they also supported community engagement activities that led to the development of a community garden that provides food to a local shelter, a farmers' market in the town square, a mental health services collaborative, and a local community outreach effort led by Retired Senior Volunteer Program volunteers.

Since Lifelong Mableton, ARC has replicated policies and best practices in eight other communities in the region helping them establish innovative local partnerships, integrate Lifelong Community Principles into local planning, create community engagement opportunities through citizen participation and host programs and activities that meet the needs of people. Implementation activities throughout the region have led to over 18 new community gardens and farmers' markets, better sidewalks and safer intersections, zoning changes in four different communities, senior housing ordinances in two jurisdictions, and many new healthy living initiatives. The United States Environmental Protection Agency and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging have recognized the Lifelong Communities Initiative because of its transferability and capacity to work across all ages. Communities can utilize tools from ARC's approach to measure

the needs of their community, learn about the issues, engage with local resident groups, elected officials, and stakeholders, and customize small steps for change.

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