AARP Public Policy Institute

Opportunities for Creating Livable Communities

*This **In Brief** provides a framework for understanding the common barriers communities confront in their quest to create more livable areas and offers several examples of how communities have used a variety of planning and zoning tools to overcome these barriers to benefit residents of all ages.*

Communities of all sizes across the United States are applying the concept of livability to holistically address a range of challenges, such as a growing population of older residents, rising housing costs, and limited transportation alternatives. AARP has defined a Livable Community to be "one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options. Together these facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life."

Examples of Communities That Have Overcome Barriers

- Santa Cruz, California, amended its single family home zoning district to allow accessory dwelling units (a rental unit within the home or elsewhere on the property). This change not only increases the number of smaller, more affordable units in existing neighborhoods, but also provides home owners with an opportunity to draw steady income from the rental of these units, a boon to older people who would like to stay in their own homes but need additional income to be able to do so. Such units also enable older people who rent the units to downsize their living arrangements within their communities.

- To facilitate residents' use of public transit services, Arlington, Virginia, oriented high density residential and

Components of Livable Communities and Common Barriers

Components	Common Barriers
Housing	- A lack of diverse housing options (e.g., single-family, multifamily, accessory dwelling, assisted living and other supportive housing) restricts choices. - Rigid separation between residential, commercial, and recreational areas makes it difficult to reach daily necessities and community amenities. - Markets fail to provide affordable and accessible units for all incomes and abilities. - Homes lack design features to serve residents across their life span.
Transportation and mobility	- The automobile is the main, and often exclusive, mode of transportation. - Other transportation options, such as public transit, are limited or nonexistent, particularly in suburban and rural areas. - Road design in many suburbs separates neighborhoods and impedes mobility; there is often little connectivity between different modes of transportation. - Walking is neither facilitated nor encouraged.
Land use	- Expansion into less dense or undeveloped areas is frequently favored over efficient use of existing urban areas. - Development tends to be scattered and separated by function and design. - Open spaces are inaccessible and unconnected. - Former industrial sites ("brownfields") are abandoned. - More energy is consumed because land uses are kept separate.

commercial development toward existing transit systems, the result being residents of all ages drive less and take far more trips on transit and foot relative to suburban residents.

- Oregon developed a model development code for small cities (less than 10,000 people) to facilitate the creation of mixed-use development and improved street design standards. This model code has enabled smaller, resource-strapped cities to revise outdated codes. New development connects residences to nearby retail and services via streets that provide safe pedestrian circulation.

- Aging Atlanta, part of the Atlanta Regional Commission, provides transportation vouchers to older persons that they can use to hire friends or family members to drive them, to ride the bus or train, or to take a taxi. The Commission has found this program to be less expensive than providing traditional van services that take older adults to doctors' offices or senior centers.

- Nashville, Tennessee, inventoried all 727 miles of sidewalks and prepared a strategic plan for sidewalk and bikeway improvements. Investments are prioritized based on complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the number of people served, the types of people served (children, older adults, and persons with disabilities), and whether the projects provide access to key services (schools, libraries, parks, stores, senior centers, and assisted living facilities).

Components of Livable Communities and Common Barriers *(continued)*

Components	Common Barriers
Cooperation and communication	- Cooperation among adjacent communities is limited. - NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) reactions hinder development of livable community projects. - Communication among agencies that could help advance livable community objectives is limited. - Communication between livable community advocates and community residents is poor.
Public education and involvement in community planning	- Planning takes place without sufficient knowledge about the community and its residents. - The public does not fully understand the aging boom on a community level and how it may affect decision-making and service delivery over time. - Inadequate public engagement and participation in community planning affect possible options.
Leadership	- A lack of "political will" often hinders measures that would make the community more livable.

- Following the blistering heat wave of 1995, which killed hundreds of people, most of them elderly, Chicago began an initiative to reduce the ambient summer temperatures in the city. An ordinance increasing tree-planting requirements for parking lots was adopted, along with requirements for plantings on parking structures and in garage setbacks. Rooftop gardens, like the one constructed atop the 11-story City Hall downtown are encouraged, as are light-colored roofs and alternative paving materials.

In Brief