What Is A "Livable" Community and Why Is It Important?

A livable community is one that is safe, provides affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options. Together, these community features ensure personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life. A livable community has a balanced transportation system that includes public transportation and transit-oriented development (TOD). Key features of a livable community include a mix of land uses – where shops, offices and housing types are intermingled – and adequate density so that residents can get around on foot, bike, and transit.

Transit's Role in Livable Communities

Public transit plays a key role for a livable community, providing mobility for those who cannot or choose not to drive. Public transit ensures transportation for trips that are longer than walking distances for people who, because of older age or disability, find walking difficult. A livable community is one where there are options for local transportation. Automobile transportation will remain important for our rural communities, but other options must be available so that older residents no longer driving their cars can maintain their independence and quality of life.

"It is a myth that rural populations are totally self-sufficient and don't need transportation options. People who live in large cities, small towns and rural areas all have the same concerns and transportation options are needed for everyone."

Allison Brooks
Chief of Staff, Reconnecting America
Meeting Older Adults’ Mobility Needs
Transit's Role in Livable Rural Communities

Benefits of “Livability” and Transit Oriented Development for Older Adults and Rural Communities

- Provides affordable housing and transit choices.
- Gives individuals flexibility in where they live and work.
- Can improve regional and inter-regional mobility.
- Improves rural connectivity through multi-modal solutions.
- Improves walkability and connectivity which provides increased opportunities for physical activity in daily life and can result in improved health for individuals.

What Are the Characteristics of a Livable Rural Community?

1. Public Transportation and Mobility Options

While the private car remains a primary mode of transportation in rural areas, it is vital that older adults living in rural communities have other options, since many limit their driving or have stopped driving entirely. Public transit modes, such as fixed and flex routes, offer local mobility on a scheduled basis, and demand response services, including dial-a-rides and senior shuttles, provide more personalized service, needed by some older adults. Other mobility options that a community can offer include subsidized taxi service and volunteer transportation.

2. Mixed Land Use

A key feature of livable rural communities is a mix of land uses, with a compact town center. When residential areas are close by shopping and retail areas and other community services, older adults can walk to their destinations. The mixing of land uses and compact development also improve public transit, since transit is more effective with higher densities. Studies have shown that older adults who live in more compact, walkable communities are less isolated because they can get out and about more easily.

3. Pedestrian Friendly Design

Walking is the second most popular means of travel among people age 65 and above. To facilitate walking, older adults need sidewalks and crosswalks that are safe and, importantly, that connect to destinations. This means residential areas should be close by shopping and retail areas, government services, healthcare facilities, and other important destinations, with sidewalks linking the various places. Improving pedestrian facilities also makes public transit easier, as every bus trip begins and ends with a walking trip.

Chittenden County is a mix of rural areas and small city and suburban developments in northwestern Vermont. The county’s Regional Planning Commission developed Guidelines for Transit-Oriented Design (TOD) for use by the public and private sector involved in land development, including municipal planners, planning commissions, and developers. The Guidelines demonstrate how to include transit in development decisions which in turn improves the livability of Chittenden County. This is particularly important given the aging of the population. The county believes that public transit can be more appealing, benefiting the county with:

- More mobility for all citizens;
- Reduction in total vehicle-miles-traveled on county roads, reducing maintenance costs;
- Enhancing the overall transportation system capacity without having to increase the amount of blacktop;
- Less traffic on local streets.

The Guidelines have been a useful tool to members of the Vermont State Legislature when considering funding decisions that impact both transportation and land use.

The TOD "Guidelines for Planners, Policymakers, Developers and Residents" are available at: http://www.ccrpvt.org/library/Transit/TOD_ChittendenCounty_2002.pdf. Other resources available from Chittenden County include the County’s public transit operators 2010 transportation development plan, which includes an in-depth discussion about TOD and sustainable development: http://www.cctaride.org/pdf/ Documents/Chapter5.pdf
4. Mixture of Housing Types

A livable community has a mix of housing types with varying levels of affordability and accessibility, including townhouses, apartments, accessory housing, assisted living, and other supportive housing. Communities with only one type of housing, such as low-density single family homes, are limiting housing choices and may drive up housing costs. Accessory housing, or accessory dwelling units, is a creative strategy to provide additional housing options for older adults. These are apartments in single-family homes or on the property, such as over a detached garage. Some jurisdictions allow accessory housing purposefully to provide a limited number of small housing units for residents who are elderly or disabled. Accessory housing may also benefit older adults aging-in-place in single family homes, giving them the opportunity to gain rental income from a small unit on their property and to provide living space for a caregiver. Various states, including Washington, Oregon and Vermont, support this in statute.

Montpelier is a small community of less than 8,000 residents along the banks of the Winooski River in central Vermont, the state capital since 1805. Older neighborhoods near the downtown have homes of different sizes on small lots. Looking for creative ways to add to local housing options, the city took advantage of Vermont’s state statute that allows for accessory apartments. This state law is intended to increase the number of affordable housing units, and states that municipalities must allow homeowners to turn a portion of their home into an accessory dwelling.

Going beyond the state law, Montpelier actively promoted creation of accessory apartments with a grant program called “One More Home.” Grants up to $4,000 were available to interested homeowners to help offset costs of creating an accessory apartment. The grant program facilitated five new accessory housing apartments in Montpelier, providing new housing options in the downtown area close to public transit service. Downtown residents can readily use Green Mountain Transit Agency’s many Montpelier routes and connect to other intercity Vermont transit services.

Meridian, Mississippi, with a population of nearly 40,000, is a rural hub for Lauderdale County. Through involvement of stakeholder partners and utilizing multiple funding sources, the community helped Meridian develop into a regional focal point. TOD initiatives included reviving Meridian’s Union Station, a regional transit center that serves 300,000 people annually. Additionally, there was restoration and beautification of historic structures, creation of a state of the art performance and conference facility, and development of attractive low to middle income duplex and single-family housing.

Meridian’s Funding Partners:

- Federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) HOPE VI grants
- State (Mississippi DOT) / Federal funding
  - ISTEA Enhancement Grant
  - Supplemental Grant (MDOT)
  - STIP Grant Transfer
  - STP-93
- Local funding
- Prepaid leases

Successful TOD seeks to meet important goals, such as providing affordable housing, creating greater access to opportunities for all people, providing mobility options, accommodating healthier lifestyles and reducing our dependence on foreign oil while lowering our greenhouse gas emissions. A key policy challenge is retaining this below-market-rate housing while simultaneously developing better and more affordable transportation and housing options where people can establish more affordable lifestyles.

AARP Public Policy Institute
A Variation on Livable Communities

The village model is part of the larger aging-in-place movement seen in many communities. This model is a new, grassroots approach for people who want to stay in their community and ensure greater support services than most cities and towns currently provide.

Each village is a self-governing, non-profit organization, focused on helping older adults remain in their neighborhoods and homes by coordinating and delivering programs and services. The core services include transportation, grocery shopping, community event organization, information and referral services, and geriatric care management. Transportation is often the service with greatest need. Most villages rely on volunteers for transportation, setting up volunteer driving programs. They also help with public transportation when there are suitable public transit options.

There are more than 50 villages in the U.S., with many more in the early stages of formation. The villages vary widely in size, structure and resources, but significantly, they are self-supporting. Membership fees provide the majority of village funding, with additional funds from donations and foundation grants. The online Village to Village Network (see www.vtvnetwork.org) disseminates information and helps interested communities establish new villages.

More information?

- AARP National and State Offices: www.aarp.org
- AARP Public Policy Institute: http://www.aarp.org/research/ppi/
- Reconnecting America focuses on the link between transportation and community development, providing TOD resources at: www.reconnectingamerica.org
- Transportation for America: “Aging in Place: Stuck without Options” www.t4america.org
- Federal Transit Administration: “Better Coordination of Transportation and Housing Programs to Promote Affordable Housing Near Transit” http://www.fta.dot.gov/
- Small Urban and Rural Transit Center works to improve the mobility and increase transit options of residents in rural and small urban settings. http://www.surtc.org/