

White House Conference on Aging Officially Designated Event  
Transportation Solutions for an Aging Society  
April 14, 2005  
MIT Faculty Club, Cambridge, MA

## Expanding Mobility Options for Older Adults: Community Design Incentives

William W. Millar  
American Public Transportation Association  
1666 K Street N.W.  
Washington, DC 20006-1215

[wmillar@apta.com](mailto:wmillar@apta.com)  
Phone: (202) 496-4820  
Fax: (202) 496-4322

## Issue Statement

Growing Mobility Needs of Older Adults is a Megatrend: The population of older adults in the United States is growing and is becoming an increasingly larger proportion of the total population. These older adults come from a range of economic classes, enjoy varying degrees of health and have diverse mobility needs. In general, older adults are staying healthier than older adults of the past, but because of their growing numbers, the number of older adults with disabilities is also growing. Finding alternative transportation for older adults who cannot drive, who choose not to drive or who reach the point where they can no longer drive safely is becoming increasingly important.

This paper will focus on ways to foster mobility options for older adults through improved community design and adding adequate public transportation service where it does not exist today. The paper holds that the mobility of older adults is hampered by community design features that often are not supportive of public transportation use.

Expanding Mobility Options for Older Adults: The policy themes of this paper have previously been prioritized by AARP in its recent publication *The Priorities Book*. Therein, amongst all issues, the three top priorities for older Americans were identified as Economic Security; Health Care; and Livable Communities.

In *The Priorities Book*, AARP's statement on Livable Communities reads as follows:

*No one wants to lose their independence as they age. The vast majority of older people want to stay in their homes and communities while they are fit and healthy, and even after they begin to need long-term support.*

*Communities should be "livable" for those who are aging – with realistic housing options, ways of getting around, and access to services and public spaces that promote independence.*

*...And they must have other ways of getting around if they wish to stop driving or if it is unsafe for them to continue doing so.*

In 2004 AARP looked deeper into the mobility issue, adopting a *Ten Year Social Impact Agenda* focused on a single overarching goal: *People 50+ will have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable for them and society as a whole.*

In January, 2005 AARP released a *Five-Year Mobility Action Agenda* that identified the goal to increase the percentage of adults who have the mobility choices they need to remain independent as they age. The report noted that to live independently and age successfully, older Americans must be able to maintain a mobile lifestyle. The report also cited that when driving becomes more difficult, many Americans discover that they have few options.

Earlier research released through the April 2004 report *Aging Americans: Stranded without Options* by the Surface Transportation Policy Project found that older non-drivers have a decreased ability to participate in the community. For example, they make on average 15 percent fewer trips to the doctor and 65 percent fewer trips for social and religious activities than older drivers make. This disparity of mobility leads to increased isolation of the individual and interferes with the role of that individual as a productive resource in our society.

## Transportation and Community Design:

Too many Americans – older adults as well as the population as a whole – simply lack adequate transportation options. U.S. DOT's November 2003 report titled *Safe Mobility for a Maturing Society: Challenges and Opportunities* found that 50 years of suburbanization with choices of home sites dispersed across the community and beyond can leave those aging in place completely auto-dependent and stranded when they can no longer drive. The report stated that “The availability of activities and services within walking range and access to public transportation can become very important to older persons....”.

A report released in October, 2004 by the AARP Public Policy Institute titled *The Impact of Federal Programs on Transportation for Older Adults* recommended increased federal investment in public transportation in order to expand public transportation service in the suburbs and fringes of metropolitan areas to benefit the increasing numbers of older adults who live in those areas. The report cites the need for more transportation services that address the needs and travel patterns of older adults.

These findings were reinforced by the most recent *American Housing Survey* conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Census Bureau, which found that only 45% of American households have access to public transportation of any kind. In many cases, places where transit services are provided lack the level of service and amenities that can attract choice riders.

In addition to the need for more and better public transportation service, we must also confront the issue that many communities where older adults increasingly live - particularly those in suburban communities - are designed to accommodate travel via automobile and create serious challenges for those who otherwise could benefit from sustained mobility and independence through the use of public transportation and walking.

In many suburban communities, greater travel distances resulting from cul-de-sacs and winding roads, low density housing often make transit difficult to provide and use. Lack of connections between subdivisions forces buses to use busy arterials, which may be unappealing waiting environments for passengers. Many bus stops are not reachable by sidewalks, forcing passengers to walk and sometimes wait in the street. Also, the design of many suburban destination points, shopping centers for example, are often an isolated building surrounded by parking without transit or pedestrian friendly features. Often, wide streets need to be traversed by foot. Clearly, this is an environment older adults and indeed people of any age would find accessible only by car.

Many best practices in the area of design have been documented by Ronald J. Kilcoyne, General Manager of the Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority in his 2005 study *Planning for Transit in New Development – How to Make any Development Transit Friendly*. Mr. Kilcoyne found that residential developments that are separated from arterials where transit routes will normally operate provide a strong disincentive for transit use. Such separation / isolation can be from the walls of a residential community. Separation may also result from entrances to the development that are located remote from the major intersections where transit stops will normally be placed. The lack of traffic lights at many intersections where bus stops should be located either results in not locating a bus stop at that location or creating a potential unsafe condition for older adults who must cross a street.

The dangers of the pedestrian walk and how design has made too many of these trips dangerous is well documented in the *Mean Streets 2004* study by the Surface Transportation Policy Project. The report concluded that America's streets are most inhospitable to our youngest and oldest citizens. Citing a growing number of pedestrian deaths, particularly in communities designed for the rapid flow of automobile traffic, the report called for slowing down traffic through traffic-calming and enforcement, and by promoting walking and public transportation choices.

Promoting Full Transit Accessibility through Development of an Accessible Pedestrian Environment:

There is clear evidence, however, that many older adults want to live in environments that offer mobility options. A September 2004 report titled *Hidden in Plain Sight*, prepared for the Federal Transit Administration by the Center for Transit Oriented Development, showed that households headed by people age 65 and over account for 35 percent of the likely candidates for housing in transit and pedestrian friendly, higher-density, mixed use areas. This compares with the groups proportion of total population of only 28 percent.

The elimination of barriers that would prevent older adults with disabilities from freely accessing public transportation is a critical task. Design features such as sidewalks, curb cuts, railings, bus shelters, readable signage and traffic signals that give priority to pedestrians can help eliminate such barriers for pedestrians and transit users.

Still, many communities have found that many older adults have questions about how to ride public transportation. Many transit agencies have instituted travel-training programs that provide information, personalized orientation and specialized training on use of public transportation options. Other programs oriented to the special needs of older adults include reduced-fare programs, expanding use of low-floor vehicles, policies that allow drivers to deviate bus routes to get as close to the requested stop as possible, and listening sessions for specially designed to obtain input from older adults. Such programs enable older adults to integrate with the community through the general public transportation system. As current demand for dial-a-ride paratransit services exceeds budget and capacity in many cases, making fixed-route services attractive and useful is an attractive, sustainable approach.

### **Current Federal Role:**

The adopted mission statement of the United States Department of Transportation is: *Serve the United States by ensuring a fast, safe, efficient, accessible and convenient transportation system that meets our vital national interests and enhances the quality of life of the American people, today and into the future.* Based on this mission statement, critical federal support is being applied in the following areas:

Funding Support for Public Transportation Investment: Public transportation in America is supported through a combination of user fees, and the investments by federal, state, local government and private sector sources. The primary source of federal support is through the Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Act of 1964, as amended. This law has been instrumental in the renaissance of public transportation in America following decades of decline in the post World War II years.

Fostering Coordination Human Service Transportation Services: U.S. DOT's United-We-Ride initiative and the February, 2004 White House Executive Order on Human Service Transportation Coordination are having a significant impact in simplifying access, enhancing cost efficiencies, and reducing duplication of federal rules and regulation. The Executive Order requires the 11 participating federal departments to show progress in managing and simplifying the 62 federal programs that currently fund transportation services for older adults, persons with disabilities, and individuals with lower incomes.

Older Americans Act: The Older Americans Act provides grants to states for community planning and service programs, as well as for research, demonstration and training programs in the field of aging. In light of growing mobility needs for older adults, it is in order to consider a greater emphasis on community design and mobility issues in the next reauthorization of the act.

Encouraging Community Design that Facilitates Walking and Public Transit Use: Although community design and land use issues rightfully fall in the domain of local governments, the federal government has a role in making communities aware of best practices from around the country. Significantly, favorable community design features will lead to greater mobility options for seniors and will enable them to age in place productively beyond the years they are able to operate an automobile. Thus, all levels of government need to be concerned about design.

## **Policy Opportunity**

The premise that public transportation is an essential mobility option for all older adults and can be a lifeline for persons who may no longer be able to drive has been established. For those who may no longer be able to drive, public transportation becomes a lifeline. The problem is that good and reliable public transportation is not always available, and even if it were there may be barriers to accessing it.

Older adults make rational transportation choices given the options that are available to them. When good public transportation exists, people will use it. Reports that show a low use of public transportation usually blur the contribution that public transportation makes in community mobility by burying transit use statistics in area wide, statewide or even national aggregate data. People will choose to ride transit in areas well served by quality and reliable public transportation that is designed to meet their needs. In places where public transportation does not exist or where it is not easily accessible to older adults, it will not offer a useful mobility option. People can't use what they don't have.

Thus, community design can either be an incentive to use public transportation, or it can be a disincentive. The upcoming White House Conference on Aging presents an opportunity to highlight the need to more public transportation investments in communities. Moreover, the pending reauthorization of the Older Americans Act is an opportunity to identify needs for research, demonstration and training needs so that community design and travel training needs can be supported.

Finally, special emphasis must be given to the pending reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA 21). This bill is the centerpiece of federal policy on transportation and mobility. More than any other piece of legislation, this is the bill that will define our transportation future, and the level of mobility we chose to afford our citizens. We must invest in our mobility, and TEA 21 is the way to accomplish so many of the policy goals put forth in this paper.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The White House Conference on Aging should give consideration to the following ideas as it considers ways to enhance the mobility options and lifestyles of America's older adults:

- **Increase federal investments in public transportation in order to improve mobility for older adults and for all Americans.** As a policy goal, funding should be sufficient to allow for improved and expanded public transportation services so that Americans have the freedom to travel where and when they want.
- **As part of the reauthorization of the Older American's Act, Congress should allocate funding for research and demonstration projects which create optimal pedestrian and public transportation environments that can enable older adults to age in place, particularly in suburban areas that currently may not offer convenient alternatives to driving.**
- **As part of the reauthorization of the Older American's Act, Congress should consider an Incentive Grant Program to Expand and Enhance Senior Transportation in order to provide funding to address community design issues. This grant program could be designed to demonstrate innovation in these and other areas:**
  - Transit service design for suburbs which offers "feeder" services on demand, such as route-deviation taking riders to nearby community destinations.
  - Full involvement by public transportation providers and other community stakeholders including older adults in the design of all new development and redevelopment to assure effective and efficient routing of transit service, optimal location and accommodation of transit stops and connectivity of pedestrian facilities to transit stops from the catchment area of each transit stop.
  - Information technology systems that can facilitate travel by communicating timely and usable information.
  - Concentrated streetscape developments and amenities which welcome older adults as well as people with disabilities or parents with strollers, affording access to transit pick-up points from housing areas, e.g. flat, well-lit, shaded sidewalks and "safe walks" of impermeable surfaces, with benches, railings, and curb cuts along the pedestrian walkways; safe street crossings; shelters that are well-lighted and maintained; larger signage; and restroom facilities at passenger transfer points and pedestrian areas.
  - Standardized regional eligibility programs for paratransit services which could lead to a nationally recognized qualification.

- Coordinated, reliable services among the local providers with bus operators having the technology for scheduling and dispatching so they are able to trade pick-up responsibilities throughout the day and evening.
- Passenger-friendly vehicles offering level boarding, bus stop announcements and other amenities for older adults.
- Public outreach and communication for older adults so that public transit becomes and is a desirable mobility solution for an aging society.
- Design and implementation of partnerships and multi-source funding plans.
- Urban village development with higher density nodes; mixed land use including residential retail, medical, and commercial planning; and a transit and pedestrian orientation.
- Cooperative efforts with the public transportation industry to promote best practices in the areas of service configuration, amenities and coordination of services.
- Arterial streets with wider right-lanes which facilitate passenger boarding, and avoiding sometimes risky off street pull-in areas.

## **Conclusion**

Finding alternative transportation for older adults who cannot drive or for those who reach the point where they can no longer drive safely can be made easier with the provision of adequate public transportation services. Simply put, older adults need more mobility options through public transportation. Equally important, success hinges on creating a continuous, navigable pathway for pedestrians that is free of barriers and potential danger. Total pedestrian access is directly related to both universal design and livable communities and should be promoted as such.

Policy makers at all levels have a role in finding the solutions. Mobility for older adults will require cooperative efforts of local, state and federal government agencies and other partners that are critically involved in all facets of transportation and community design. Accordingly, the White House Conference on Aging needs to recognize mobility for older adults as the priority public policy issue that it has become and assign it a prominent place on the agenda for its October 2005 discussions.