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FEATURE

# Aging Populations

by Clare Smith, Henry Tingle, and Joan Twiss

Large numbers of baby boomers will soon start receiving Social Security checks. In fact, some are already receiving them if they took early retirement or have a disability. This important demographic shift will create significant consequences—both good and bad—for local governments. What must local governments do today to get ready for this imminent demographic transition?

## Numbers Are Dramatic

Eighty million boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) will be retiring from full-time employment in the U.S. economy during the next two decades. This significant demographic shift should compel local governments across the United States to facilitate community-based planning and services in order to promote healthy and vital aging in their communities. The numbers are dramatic.

In 2006, there were an estimated 37 million older Americans representing more than 12 percent of the total population. During the next 20 years, the number of older adults will increase to 71.5 million and will represent nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population in 2030.

## Why Plan for This Demographic Shift?

The aging of the baby-boomer generation will lead to both challenges and opportunities:

1. Escalating service demands. The aging boomer population will need and demand age-friendly services from local governments and their service partners. Aging boomers will expect an increase in affordable and accessible housing and transit, a walkable community environment, library and information hubs, and leisure and educational services—all of which come at a significant cost to local governments, educational agencies, special districts, and nonprofits. Because of boomers' numbers, education, and organizational expertise, institutions have always responded to their evolving needs as they have moved through the decades. This generation is a force to be reckoned with.
2. Smart growth land patterns. The aging of boomers and their needs will call into question spread-out suburban land use patterns. Most suburbs are not well designed for aging residents. The aging of boomers will undoubtedly accelerate the implementation of smart growth strategies and promote more compact, mixed-use, and transit-oriented developments.
3. Cost-effective health promotion efforts. As boomers age, it is anticipated that they will have more problems related to such conditions as obesity, diabetes, and arthritis. Without thoughtful housing and transit design, communities will experience a greater incidence of injuries sustained in the home and community, triggering increased use of costly emergency response as well as medical care.
4. Civic contributions. Boomers want to age in place. They enjoy their communities and homes. They have an existing social network that they value. Most significantly, they want to remain active and engaged. Most baby boomers are healthy and possess a rich array of skills, knowledge, expertise, and relationships. In addition to these resources, boomers who have moved into their next life phase have the time and energy to devote to community improvement and public service. If local governments and nonprofits intentionally and actively seek to engage baby boomers as part-time employees and volunteers, boomers will become an impetus for new social progress and community enrichment.
5. Economic benefits. Boomers include the richest age cohort in American society. If local governments and other institutions can provide the necessary support system so boomers can comfortably age in place, they will contribute to the economic well-being of the community—by buying goods and services; banking in local financial institutions; investing in local real estate or maintaining their investments; and supporting local charities, nonprofits, and the arts. Communities do not want to lose these boomer consumers and investors.

## Community Planning to Promote Aging Well

A community-based planning process to prepare communities and regions for the baby-boomer transition should integrate a number of areas: housing, mobility and transportation, supportive services, employment, lifelong learning, and community engagement.

As they initiate planning for responding to their citizens' healthy aging, local governments should consider two primary issues:

1. Planning for healthy aging requires participation and commitment from all affected sectors. Local government can play major roles, including conversation starter, convener, and galvanizer of action. By facilitating a broad community-based planning process, local governments can avoid being identified as the sole responder to the needs and demands of the aging boomer population.
2. It is necessary to get started sooner rather than later. In the long run, being proactive will save the community significant human and financial resources.

## Considerations in Engaging Boomers

In addition to involving its own departments, other public and nonprofit agencies, and business organizations in a vital aging and planning process, local governments must, of course, engage the boomers who are transitioning from full-time employment to their next life phase. As conversation starters, conveners, and facilitators of this planning process, local government leaders need to be mindful of several key considerations.

**Select the right language.** Traditional phrases like "senior citizen" and "elderly" are not terms with which boomers identify. In many cases, they reject these terms outright. In a survey conducted by the Journalists Exchange on Aging, professional journalists who cover aging issues concurred that the terms "elderly" and "senior citizens" are outdated. As alternatives, they suggested "boomers" and "midlife" adults.

The planning process, therefore, should avoid certain terms and incorporate language and images that better resonate with the boomer generation.

**Understand what drives boomers.** The events of the 1960s shaped many of the attitudes of the boomer generation. As a group, boomers tend to be idealistic and driven by causes. They believe that they can change the world if they unite their voices and efforts. They tend to be rule breakers. Boomers are the first generation in which a majority attended college. These days, many boomers must strike a balance between demanding work schedules and busy private lives that may include both children and their own aging parents.

**Use variety of data-gathering and engagement approaches.** To develop the best understanding of the emerging needs and the potential contributions of the boomer population, the community planning group should use several data-gathering tools. Resident surveys are valuable for assessing the needs and interests of a representative sample of older adults in the community. Focus groups are good tools for probing beneath the survey data and gaining a more qualitative understanding of wants, challenges, and opportunities.

Public forums assist the community planning group in identifying and testing recommendations for action as well as surfacing issues and concerns. In addition to their importance as data-gathering functions, these efforts also provide opportunities to identify and recruit additional participants and leaders to get involved in any follow-up action initiatives.

**Focus on assets, not deficits.** A growing population of boomers presents certain challenges. Local governments may tend to think of aging boomers as a high-risk or vulnerable group that is going to drain public and private resources. If this becomes the tone of a community's healthy aging initiative, it is likely to deter participation and frighten off important partners. Instead, it is better to focus on the numerous valuable assets that boomers bring to their communities, including time to devote to service and civic affairs, professional skills, advanced education and experience, and discretionary income.

## Promising Practices

Across the nation, we are witnessing a wide array of efforts by local governments to promote healthy aging. Derived from a new resource, *Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action*, published by the Center for Civic Partnerships, the two case examples below suggest promising practices for local governments interested in designing their communities and modifying their service portfolios to improve support of the aging boomer generation.

Terms to Avoid	Terms to Use
Elderly, Seniors	Midlife adults, boomers
Old Age	Prime time, midlife
Retirement	Encore careers, next life phase, third age
Volunteering	Serving your community, civic engagement
Limitations	Adaptations

### Checklist for Aging Well Planning Initiatives

- Have we defined the role of local government as convener and facilitator?
- Do we have a strong and inclusive planning committee that reflects our community? Are its members committed to a long-term planning process?
- Are there important agencies or associations we should engage as cosponsors of the process?

### Case Example 1: Kirkland, Washington, "Human Service Partnerships"

Kirkland, Washington (population 45,682), located 10 miles east of Seattle, was seeing an increase in its older adult population. After conducting an assessment of the needs of older adults, the Kirkland city council established in 2002 the Kirkland Senior Council, a multigenerational group committed to improving community life for older adults. The Senior Council is extremely active and has successfully implemented a number of special projects and campaigns, including:

- Falls prevention educational campaign.
- Healthy Living Expo for baby boomers.
- Campaign to recruit older adults into neighborhood associations.
- Efforts to encourage surrounding cities to establish their own senior councils.

In 2009, the council was faced with severe budget cuts. Instead of slashing human services for older adults, the council successfully engaged the neighboring cities of Bellevue, Redmond, Issaquah, and Mercer to jointly increase funding for human services by a total of \$5.7 million. This multijurisdictional decision led the local Evergreen Health Care system to contribute an additional \$60,000 in support of the Senior Council's Health Enhancement Program (HEP). HEP provides support in the management of chronic conditions, reduces isolation and loneliness, and incorporates positive activity into the daily lives of older adults.

Promising best practices for local governments include:

1. Establish a policy that the local government will take a leadership role in developing partnerships to support the aging community.
2. Invest in local human services to strengthen the public safety net, especially for aging residents who are vulnerable during a deep economic recession.
3. Take a multisectoral and cross-jurisdictional approach to developing and maintaining a network of health promotion and other support services for older adults.
4. Create and support council-appointed coalitions as a strategy for attracting business and charitable foundation funding for planning and services.

### Case Example 2: Citrus Heights, California, "Enhancing Walkability for Older Adults"

Incorporated in 1997, Citrus Heights (population 81,824) is located in the northeast portion of the Sacramento metropolitan area and has the highest population density in the region. Consistent with the city's history of inclusion and collaboration, Citrus Heights residents participated in drafting the general plan, identifying quality-of-life expectations, defining the city's vision and mission, and establishing priority areas to enhance quality of life.

During the past several years, the city has conducted a number of healthy community activities, including cleanup and beautification programs, leadership development, safety programs, and providing "grants for blocks" that involved 2,200 residents in improving their neighborhoods. More recently, Citrus Heights has created multigenerational community gardens as well as conducted walkability studies and neighborhood ride audits that informed planning for accessible routes to services for older adults. The city is also launching a Green Planning Academy for older adults.

City staff and councilmembers incorporated the identified needs and recommended priorities from the walkability study in the annual capital improvement project budget process. As a result, multiple sidewalk in-fills and street connection projects have been completed, creating safe walking environments for residents.

As a result of persistent efforts by elected officials and staff, Citrus Heights was recently awarded \$700,000 in Safe Routes to School federal funding that will provide sidewalk in-fill and intersection upgrades along a route that links a park on one end and a commercial center on the other, with the city's high school and an elementary school in between, to encourage walking and biking for people of all ages.

Promising best practices for local governments include:

1. Engage community residents and community groups at the start and build on relationships throughout the planning process.
2. Make education a priority by implementing outreach activities and communication plans designed to reach all community members.
3. Identify short-, medium-, and long-term measurable outcomes and share accomplishments with stakeholder

Do our elected officials understand the importance of aging well and that we are embarking on a long-term community process to create an environment that facilitates and supports aging well?

- Have we decided on the specific tools (for example, planning forum, surveys, focus groups) that we want to use, and in what sequence?
- Have we agreed on some common terms and an approach that will attract boomers and overcome their avoidance and denial of aging issues?
- Do we want or need to do any advance education to ensure participants have sufficient background knowledge to feel comfortable participating and to contribute effectively to various aging well planning events?
- Have we developed culturally competent strategies to engage members of our community's racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and other diverse groups to ensure that all voices are heard?
- Do we have a communications plan for sharing results and ongoing healthy aging planning actions with elected officials, governing boards, event participants, and the larger community?

partners and the broader community.

4. Develop meaningful leadership roles for community members as a method for increasing capacity and fostering community ownership.

## Planning Tools and Resources

The Center for Civic Partnerships has a number of resources on its website at [www.civicpartnerships.org](http://www.civicpartnerships.org), and it recently published *Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement, & Action* for local governments wishing to proactively promote aging well. The toolkit consists of the following elements that will be most effective when used in combination:

- Overview of planning for aging well in communities.
- Step-by-step guides for three important data-gathering activities.
- Case studies.
- Resources section.

ICMA also provides several smart growth resources to support healthy aging:

- Resource List: Sustainable Planning for Aging in Place (2006).
- Smart Growth Network Online at [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org) (2009).
- Active Living for Older Adults: Management Strategies for Healthy and Livable Communities (2003).

These resources are currently available from ICMA at [www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org).

## Getting Started with Limited Resources

Even without an infusion of significant resources, local government leaders can take the following steps to get started in developing a community-based planning process:

1. Ask your city or county planning staff to do a simple demographic analysis of your community's older adult population.
2. Identify a lead staff person to begin conversations with potential partners about the need for a community-based planning process.
3. Convene an initial working group to begin the planning effort.
4. Use some sample data-gathering and engagement approaches (see sidebar) to identify needs, opportunities, and recommendations for all partners.

## Plan Proactively or Not?

If local governments and their partners do not plan and organize for the baby-boomer retirement wave, they will witness greater service demands and usage, increased costs and resource deficits, lost opportunity, and turmoil as aging boomers demand accommodations of all kinds.

For those communities that do respond proactively, this demographic shift will provide great opportunities for social innovation, increased local investment, and community improvement and enrichment. The choice is ours.

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