New York City and Atlanta: Cities Plan for the Aging Population

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As nearly one-fifth of the U.S. population soon will reach senior citizen status, local governments must plan for this demographic shift. Approaches under way in New York City and greater Atlanta offer lessons for how to make cities friendlier to aging residents.

The population is aging quickly, and at an accelerated rate of growth (McIlwain 2012). As Baby Boomers gray and modern health care extends lifespans, by 2030 nearly one in five U.S. residents will be 65 years old or older.

This shift in age composition will require communities to provide a broader range of services. A tsunami of older residents will put new demands on housing, transportation and mobility, health care, and a range of services, from nutritious meals to loans for home modification. It also creates opportunities for multi-generational planning, as the needs of elders and children often overlap (Greenhouse et al. 2010). Multi-generational planning can simultaneously benefit seniors and families with young children, who all need safe, walkable neighborhoods, an array of locally available services, sufficient transit options, opportunities to engage in the community, and affordable, appropriate housing.

The pace and degree of age-related decline varies dramatically from person to person, and municipalities must anticipate a range of needs. As the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) points out, "older Americans now and in the future will encompass the full spectrum of socioeconomic, physical cognitive conditions and capacities, and likewise the full range of racial, ethnic, cultural and lifestyle diversity" (n4a 2011, 1).

A recent AARP survey revealed that 88 percent of adults aged 45 and older plan to age in place, remaining in the homes and communities where they have lived, rather than retiring elsewhere or moving to an institutional setting (Keenan 2010).

The question that local governments now must ask – and answer – is "What is our role in meeting the needs of older residents?" Timely planning and creative, thoughtful policies and programs can help municipalities create communities that allow older residents to remain independent, engaged and productive as long as possible.

Cities are cash-strapped and confronting these challenges with fewer resources than ever. **A 2010 national survey found that less than 20 percent of local governments have assessed the needs of their older residents or created a strategic plan that reflects the needs or potential contributions of older adults** (n4a 2011, 43). However, many are taking at

Challenges of an Aging Population

- The proportion of people 65 years old and older was only 4% in 1900; it will hit 20% by 2040.

- The "old old" cohort - adults 75 and above - will comprise 11% of the population by 2040, compared to 1.2% in 1900.

- This rise in more frail and dependent members of society will place new demands on local services.
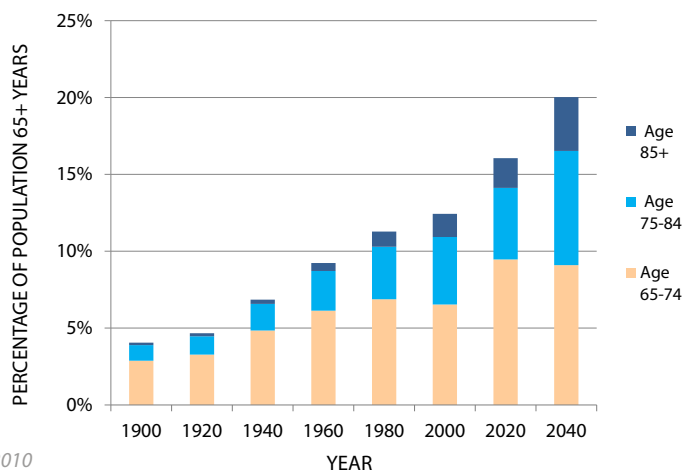
Source: Created by the author using data from the U.S. Administration on Aging, 2010

least piecemeal actions, and a few have launched comprehensive initiatives. This brief describes two of those efforts – *Lifelong Communities* in greater Atlanta and New York's *Age-friendly NYC* – and draws some lessons from their work that might aid other municipalities.

Atlanta and NYC have emerged as leaders in innovative, holistic planning for the aging population. Taken together, the challenges faced by these two metropolises represent what many local governments across the United States already face.

For Age-friendly NYC, the nonprofit New York Academy of Medicine partnered with Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council to launch a multi-faceted effort as one of the World Health Organization's global network of age-friendly cities. Dozens of programs and activities now respond to what older residents said they want and need.

Age-friendly NYC: New York, NY

"An age-friendly city encourages active aging by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. In practical terms, an age-friendly city adapts its structures and services to be accessible to and inclusive of older people with varying needs and capacities" (World Health Organization 2007).

Core Principles of Age-friendly NYC
1. Respect and social inclusion
2. Information and communication
3. Civic participation and engagement
4. Social participation
5. Housing
6. Transportation
7. Public spaces
8. Community support and health services

Timeframe: Four years (from seating of Age-friendly NYC Commission in 2010).

Funding: Combination of the New York Academy of Medicine's own resources, grants, and discretionary funding from the City.

In Atlanta, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) created Lifelong Communities, a longer-term, more policy-based initiative to help the 10-county, largely suburban region within ARC's purview become a better place to grow old. ARC selected five case study sites and, through a nine-day New Urbanism charrette, guided the creation of master plans to develop or redevelop each site as a Lifelong Community that reflects seven core principles (at right).

Lifelong Communities: Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia

A Lifelong Community is a place individuals can live throughout their lifetime that provides a full range of options to residents, ensuring a high quality of life for all (Atlanta Regional Commission).

Atlanta adopted a three-part framework as the basis for LIfelong Communities: 1) Promote housing and transportation options, 2) Encourage healthy lifestyles, and 3) Expand information and access to services.

Core principles of Lifelong Communities:
1. Connectivity
2. Pedestrian access and transit
3. Neighborhood retail and services
4. Social interaction
5. Diversity of dwelling types
6. Healthy living
7. Consideration for existing residents

Timeframe: Long term, no end date.

Funding: Combination of federal, state, and local funding as well as competititive government grant awards.

Each initiative reflects the strengths and challenges inherent to that place. New York built on its walkability, neighborhood-level businesses, cultural institutions, public transit, excellent medical institutions, and a wide array of social services. It faces very high housing costs, higher than average rates of poverty and disability among seniors, and the challenge of effective outreach to ethnically diverse residents (Finkelstein and Netherland 2010).

Metro Atlanta benefits from a strong regional planning agency, greater housing affordability, and the space to construct new developments that reflect Lifelong Communities' principles. However, Atlanta struggles with a lack of connectivity due to sprawling, fragmented development and limited public transit, especially in the suburbs. **Suburban contexts, home to half the U.S. population, present special challenges to aging in place, and Atlanta provides a model for how local governments might best approach planning for aging in these settings.**

A Look at the Initiatives

What is happening under Lifelong Communities in metro Atlanta?

Lifelong Communities centers largely on broader planning issues – land use, zoning, housing, and transportation options. **In 2009 the Atlanta Regional Commission selected five diverse case study sites to become the first Lifelong Communities.** Working

from master plans created at a nine-day charrette, each site is being developed or redeveloped according to Lifelong Communities' seven core principles (see page 2), which draw from New Urbanism, and the unique conditions of each property. Six more sites have been added in the interim.

Plans include elements such as transit-oriented development, greenways serving as connected boulevards, new town squares, retrofitting a failed shopping center, and redeveloping commercial areas.

Lifelong Communities also has helped municipalities launch smaller but still meaningful projects as the larger efforts that involve changes to infrastructure and the built environment take more time to implement.

Examples from Atlanta: Lifelong Communities

- Two municipalities – Cobb County and the City of Conyers in Rockdale County – have adopted new form-based code as part of the Lifelong Communities sites, Mableton and Conyers, respectively, within their boundaries. The new code allows for more flexible, responsive zoning that encourages mixed-used development and walkability and supports Lifelong Communities' core principles.

- In Clayton County, which expects to add 140,000 seniors by 2030, an AARP-sponsored walkability assessment brought together community

The above images illustrate existing (top) and planned development for part of suburban Mableton, a Lifelong Communities case study site located about 12 miles west of downtown Atlanta.

Image: Duany Plater-Zyberk

members to discuss the importance of walkability, particularly related to a new mixed-use development to be constructed in that community.

- Farmers markets and community gardens have started at multiple Lifelong Communities sites.

- Two new senior centers – offering amenities such as computer labs, fitness rooms, and walking trails – are being constructed in DeKalb County with proximity to public transit, local housing and mixed-use development.

- Clayton County launched a senior-friendly Web site, Lifelong Clayton.

- Through a partnership with ARC, and with the help of two federal grants, the Atlanta Housing Authority is incorporating Lifelong Communities principles into its renovation of 11 high-rise buildings for seniors and disabled residents (Blumberg 2010).

- "Grandparents for Safe Routes to Schools," a pilot program in Mableton, encourages older residents to get exercise and social interaction by walking elementary children to school.

What is happening under Age-friendly NYC?
Like all of WHO's Global Age-friendly Cities, Age-friendly NYC is rooted in the express desires of older residents themselves. **Older New Yorkers voiced a need for neighborhood-level improvements, and much of Age-friendly NYC focuses at that scale.**

The New York Academy of Medicine and City departments lead and implement most program elements. An Age-friendly NYC Commission provides high-level leadership and influence as members promote age-friendly thinking in the sectors in which they work - architecture, philanthropy, health care, higher education, community development, and finance, among others.

Examples from New York: Age-friendly NYC
Aging-improvement Districts
Three neighborhoods – East Harlem and the Upper West Side in Manhattan, and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn – were selected to pilot the aging improvement district concept. Leaders and partners conducted intensive outreach in those neighborhoods and used the findings to inform responses to issues unique to each place. Activities in those neighborhoods, several of which have been expanded to other communities, include:

- Free seniors-only hours at a local public pool;

Initiatives in New York and Metro Atlanta: Origins, Process and Implementation

Age-friendly New York City
New York, New York

Lifelong Communities
Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia

Origins: *World Health Organization*

Age-friendly New York City was launched in 2007 as a collaborative effort of the New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM), Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the New York City Council. New York is part of a network of more than 30 cities around the world that has committed to making itself age-friendly using the World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities model, which is rooted in an "active aging" framework and is based on extensive assessments of the wishes of older residents.

Process: *Thorough study of local seniors' wishes; City agencies self-assessed work through an aging lens.*

Initiative leaders first took stock of the city's baseline age-friendliness by talking to more than 1,500 people – primarily older adults, but also caregivers, service providers and others. From this research they published a 2008 findings report. Additionally, all City agencies assessed their own work through an aging lens to determine what they were already doing, or could be doing, to support older residents. This assesssment produced a 2009 plan that identified 59 specific issues organized under four themes (community and civic participation; public spaces and transportation; housing; and health and social services) and a corresponding City response to each issue.

Implementation: *NYAM implements with dedicated personnel; City departments staff to varying degrees.*

NYAM, a nonprofit that advances the health of people in cities, provides primary staffing. City departments advance the 59 issues mentioned above, although no full-time City personnel are devoted solely to the project. Age-friendly NYC seated a commission of high-profile, cross-sector leaders, organized into five workgroups, to advance age-friendly thinking in numerous fields and industries that touch aging issues from a range of angles. The five workgroups (the first two of which are most developed) are:

1) Aging Improvement Districts: Multi-sector leaders work together to identify no and low-cost improvements to a specific neighborhood based on seniors' input.

2) Age-friendly Businesses: Helps businesses attract and cater to older customers.

3) Age-friendly Schools, Colleges and Universities: Improves older adults' access to opportunities at the city's many educational institutions.

4) Age-friendly Technology: Helps older New Yorkers gain access to and build working knowledge of technology.

5) Age-friendly Professions: Prominent institutions (e.g. libraries) and professional organizations (e.g. American Institute of Architects) in various fields find ways that their professions can become more age-friendly.

Origins: *Former "Aging Atlanta Partnership"*

Lifelong Communities is an initiative of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), a nonprofit organization that serves as the official planning agency and development commission for the 10-county, 68-city Atlanta region. ARC also is the region's Area Agency on Aging. Lifelong Communities grew out of a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded effort in 2002 called the *Aging Atlanta Partnership* and was intended to "scale up" the lessons learned through that effort.

Process: *Extensive research and 9-day charrette*

In preparation to launch Lifelong Communities, ARC gathered knowledge by studying survey findings from 1,500 interviews with area seniors and spent two years conferring with a range of professionals and partners. Based on its findings, it adopted three goals as agency policy and the initiative's fundamental framework:
1) Provide housing and transportation options;
2) Encourage healthy lifestyles; and
3) Expand access to services.

Given the region's mostly fragmented, sprawling development, initiative leaders are using New Urbanism principles to guide their work. Lifelong Communities was largely shaped by the outcomes of a nine-day New Urbanism charrette co-led by urban design and planning firm Duany Plater-Zyberk. The charrette focused on creating master plans to develop or redevelop five case-study sites as the first Lifelong Communities. Each site had been pre-selected through a competitive process that required applicant municipalities to commit their own resources and have developer partners on board. The sites included:

1) *Boulevard Crossing, City of Atlanta*: 87 acres, 3 miles southeast of downtown; inner-city brownfield.
2) *City of Conyers (pop. 11,000), Rockdale County*: 142 acres, 24 miles east of Atlanta; low density, rural feeling.
3) *Mableton (pop. 37,000), Cobb County*: 20 acres, 12 miles west of Atlanta; historic train depot town.
4) *Stella Place, in City of Fayetteville (pop. 15,000)*: 40 acres, 23 miles south of Atlanta; undeveloped wooded site.
5) *Toco Hills, neighborhood in Dekalb County:* 86 acres, 8 miles northeast of downtown Atlanta; underutilized site near employment centers (Duany Plater-Zyberk 2009).

Implementation: *Local goverments implement with support from ARC.*

While not an implementation body itself, ARC supports local communities with expertise, funding and leadership as the communities work to implement Lifelong Communities. ARC incorporates the initiative's principles into regional land use, transportation and other policy.

- School buses used during off-hours to transport seniors to the grocery store;

- Improved access to laundry in public housing;

- Better programming for older adults at local institutions, such as libraries, museums and restaurants;

- An Age-Friendly Grocery Guide maps stores that offer amenities valued by seniors, such as public restrooms, handicap accessible aisles, senior discounts, and delivery.

Age-friendly Business

Local businesses can play a huge role in the daily lives of older adults. Initiative leaders educate business owners about seniors' buying power and ways to attract older shoppers. Age-friendly NYC provides guides that help businesses accommodate customers with impaired vision, hearing and mobility. It helps business owners create physical environments friendly to older adults, and better understand the types of products and services seniors desire.

City Initiatives

- In partnership with the City, a chain of health clubs with more than 50 locations offers 25 percent discounted senior memberships.

- Nearly 3,000 new bus shelters with benches have been installed throughout the five boroughs.

- For low-income seniors unable to ride public transportation, the City piloted a program that allows access to taxis using City-issued transportation vouchers.

Could you use a few more customers ?
HOW ABOUT 1 MILLION MORE ?
Make your business
AGE-FRIENDLY .
Everyone
PROFITS .

AGE-FRIENDLYNYC
The Office of the Mayor
The New York City Council
The New York Academy of Medicine

Age-friendly NYC's Local Retail Initiative provides resources like this brochure to help business owners attract and better accommodate older customers.

Lessons for Local Governments

Despite the considerable differences between urban New York City and the suburban Atlanta region, the lessons they have produced overlap and could benefit other cities and regions interested in comprehensive planning for aging and multiple generations.

Key Lesson #1: Partnerships are critical.

In both New York City and Atlanta, local governments represent only one piece of the planning puzzle. **Comprehensive planning for aging demands coordinated engagement of multiple actors and sectors, of which local government – although crucial – is only one.**

Partners may include nonprofit and community-based organizations, other municipalities, health care institutions, cultural institutions, financial institutions, businesses, and developers. In Atlanta, where a good deal of the work involves broader land use and transportation issues, getting developers on board has been critical.

Partnerships and collaboration also help dismantle the tendency to work in silos. Successful planning for aging – like most effective planning – requires coordinating efforts across sectors.

Key Point #2: Establish priorities and stay focused.

Careful research and planning should create a framework and priorities to define and guide the effort. This provides a foundation to establish, understand and communicate objectives and earn credibility and trust of key stakeholders. **In New York and Atlanta, strong core principles anchored each initiative at the start and helped keep people and projects focused as work progressed.**

Early planning should reveal opportunities and help leaders prepare for likely challenges or stumbling blocks as well as determine basic strategies.

Age-friendly NYC and Lifelong Communities were heavily shaped by input from seniors, service providers, caregivers and other key stakeholders. In New York, the Mayor asked all City agencies to assess their work and programs through an aging lens to uncover gaps and opportunities. In Atlanta, leaders at the Atlanta Regional Commission opted to integrate principles of New Urbanism, a planning and design movement that promotes alternatives to sprawl, into their work.

At the end of each planning and discovery process, the lead entities in New York and Atlanta published final documents that clearly articulated goals and priorities. In Atlanta this took the form of the Lifelong Communities Framework, which comprised three core principles (see page 2), and New York leaders produced *Toward an Age-Friendly New York City: A Findings Report* and *Age-friendly NYC: Enhancing Our City's Livability for Older New Yorkers*. These foundational documents continue to guide work in both places.

Key Point #3: Foster broad ownership.

Outreach, education and "spreading the gospel" are key to achieving the kind of broad buy-in needed for sustained success. **Coordination across services and systems is critical, but this may challenge the status quo by asking people, agencies and organizations to dismantle the silos in which they often work.** The Atlanta Regional Commission learned that personal, one-on-one relationships go a long way in bridging long-term institutional barriers, and that finding champions – ideally outside of the field of aging – is essential (Lawler and Berger 2009).

Support must come from local citizens as well as local government; in some cases when a municipality is not fully engaged, citizens can help push the agenda. For this reason ARC adapted its approach to one that can be taken on by citizens.

As part of Age-friendly NYC, Commission members are bringing age-friendly thinking into the many fields and sectors they represent – from health care to higher education to philanthropy.

Key Point #4: Early wins are important.

The pace of work matters. In both New York and Atlanta leaders realized they needed "quick successes" early on. **Visible, rapid changes appear key to energizing people and projects and laying groundwork for more significant advances down the road.**

This was key to to Lifelong Communities' work in metro Atlanta, which centers on changes to the built environment that can take years to come to fruition. In the meantime, projects with quicker start-up times, like farmers markets, community gardens and fitness initiatives, have helped build and sustain engagement and excitement.

In the early stages of Age-friendly NYC, as City agencies were assessing their own work for age-related opportunities, *Safe Streets for Seniors* was identified as a program that could be bundled into the initiative.

Safe Streets for Seniors was folded into work under Age-friendly NYC. Image: NYC Department of Transportation.

Under Safe Streets for Seniors, the City Departments of Transportation and Aging made improvements to intersections where both senior population and accident numbers were high. Transportation engineers targeted 25 neighborhoods and began with five pilot sites, one in each borough, to make safety improvements like retimed traffic lights and pedestrian signals, refurbished signage, narrowing roadways and improved pedestrian islands and crosswalk conditions (City of New York 2008).

Key Point #5: Systematize the new paradigm.

Embed this work into policies and programs. **Integrating age-friendly thinking into existing systems helps shield it from inevitabilities like staff or leadership turnover.**

The Atlanta Regional Commission, as an agency that develops planning policy, wove Lifelong Communities principles into PLAN 2040, a major regional transportation, land use and economic development plan for the coming decades. Further, as a regional council of governments, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs allows ARC to establish standards for how local governments will implement PLAN 2040, which ARC then helps local governments meet. Municipalities in the region have also integrated Lifelong Communities principles into various city and county plans.

In New York, while the New York Academy of Medicine is less naturally connected to policy opportunities, Age-friendly NYC leaders are passing the baton to community-based partners so that the work and programs become integrated in multiple places. As a time-limited endeavor, NYAM is working to ensure that the gains outlive the formal life of the initiative.

Key Point #6: Language matters, and communication keeps people interested and accountable.

As local governments begin to talk about planning for aging, they should give thought to language and terminology. **Societal perceptions of aging are shifting away from loss and decline and toward productivity and achievement.** Words like "senior," "elderly," and even "aging" may hold negative connotations, especially for boomers (Graham 2012). Lifelong Communities, for example, is a name that puts aging in the context of the entire lifespan and highlights the fact that vibrant, sustainable communities meet the needs of multiple generations.

Leaders in both New York and Atlanta clearly communicated their findings and strategies. **Making information accessible to the public and other stakeholders helps keep the process transparent, demonstrates that community input is reflected in strategies, and helps sustain momentum.**

In both New York and Atlanta, initiative leaders provide a collection of resources to help other communities plan for aging residents. Age-friendly NYC has its own regularly updated Web site, and the Atlanta Regional Commission's Lifelong Communities Web pages include up-to-date information about progress at each case study site as well as information about the program's mission and framework. Each initiative created handbooks outlining how to create Age-friendly and Lifelong Communities, respectively (see Resources section).

The Atlanta Regional Commission also supplies examples of best practice ordinances to help municipalities craft senior living and personal home

The community garden in Mableton, one of Atlanta's Lifelong Communities, provides opportunities for community engagement, growing healthy food, physical activity, and intergenerational interaction.
Image: Atlanta Regional Commission

care ordinances. Age-friendly NYC created resources for local businesses to help them attract and accommodate older customers. It even offers window decals that business owners can use to identify themselves as age-friendly.

Conclusion

Prominent gerontologist John Pynoos talks about the prevalence of "Peter Pan" housing – designed for people who will never get old. Cities face a similar conundrum, which is increasingly problematic as the number of older adults will more than double between 2010 and 2050, from 40 million to 88 million (US Census Bureau 2012).

While some needs are unique to older adults, creative policies and programs that take advantage of opportunities to serve multiple generations through shared services are likely to have the most impact (Generations United 2002). Shared sites, shared services and universal design meet the needs of all residents and help build political coalitions for change (Greenhouse et al. 2010).

Many municipalities, especially smaller ones, may find it daunting to undertake a comprehensive initiative. However, most local governments can take at least basic steps, and a regional planning agency or nonprofit organization may have capacity, expertise and access to additional resources to lead a larger initiative.

As more municipalities across the country begin to act, new evidence will emerge on how local governments can address the changing needs of their aging residents.

In East Harlem, Age-friendly NYC's first pilot Aging-improvement District, seniors-only hours at a public pool are offered free twice a week. Based on its success, more than a dozen pools in the city now offer senior hours. This type of program is simple and inexpensive to implement.

Image: Jeff Mays/DNAinfo

RESOURCES

NEW YORK CITY

Age-Friendly NYC
New York Academy of Medicine and City of New York

Toward an Age-friendly New York City: A Findings Report
New York Academy of Medicine

Age-friendly NYC: Enhancing Our City's Livability for Older New Yorkers
City of New York

Creating an Age-friendly NYC One Neighborhood at a Time
New York Academy of Medicine

Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide
World Health Organization

Checklist of Essential Features of an Age-friendly City
World Health Organization

Active Ageing: A Policy Framework
World Health Organization

METROPOLITAN ATLANTA

Lifelong Communities
Atlanta Regional Commission

Lifelong Communities Handbook: Creating Opportunities for Lifelong Living
Atlanta Regional Commission

GENERAL

The Maturing of America: Communities Moving Forward for an Aging Population (2010 National Survey Results)
National Association for Area Agenices on Aging (n4a)

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