



RETIREMENT LIVING

‘Livable Communities’ Meet Seniors’ Needs

FRANCES SPAK had not been on a bicycle in 67 years. Now the 82-year-old retired social worker speeds along a flat trail by a river in a Portland, Ore., park on a stable three-wheeler—thanks to a partnership between the city and a nonprofit called Elders in Action. The residents can borrow these bikes like library books, and the group’s staff makes sure the seniors know how to brake and shift gears.

Spak, a widow, is one of 31 members of an Elders in Action committee (www.eldersinaction.org) that advises the government on ways to make Portland more elder friendly. She has testified before the City Council on pedestrian safety. “Suggestions were taken seriously about building more sidewalks and pedestrian islands, and installing traffic lights and crosswalks on busy streets,” she says.

With the help of Elders in Action, Portland is turning into one of a growing number of “livable communities,” which are readying themselves for the exploding population of aging baby-boomers. These places are taking a hard look at the way their physical characteristics and services can help a senior live safely and make use of a community’s amenities.

When a town or city seeks to become senior friendly, it analyzes many facets of community life. Does the community have centers and parks where older people can socialize? Do neighborhoods have safe, well-designed sidewalks, and roads with clear signs and pedestrian crosswalks?

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A livable community, for example, may place senior housing near health centers and grocery stores. St. Paul built senior housing on top of a public library, and Manchester, N.H., constructed housing above stores. Or a community could provide door-to-door transportation services for the elderly.

Robert McNulty, president of Partners for Livable Communities, a nonprofit group that promotes elder-friendly changes, says it's in the interest of local governments to keep and attract older people. "They are talented and well educated," he says. "Hospitals, retail, educational offerings, housing and transportation will have to readjust to the age wave to assure valuable assets remain in the community."

The livable-community movement has been spearheaded by foundations, public officials, city-planning experts and nonprofit agencies devoted to seniors. One leader is the AARP Livable Communities program (www.aarp.org). Also, Partners for Livable Communities (www.livable.com) and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging have developed the Aging in Place Initiative (www.aginginplace.org). The program conducts workshops around the U.S. and provides grants to groups that come up with ideas to make their communities senior friendly.

One showcase is Portland. After Elders in Action ran a focus group on mobility issues, the organization, with help from city officials, recruited older adults to conduct neighborhood walking audits. In response to the findings, the government installed longer-timed traffic lights so seniors don't have to rush to cross a street. It also supplied more benches so older people could take longer walks.

Portland also added more bus routes to senior centers and senior housing. Bus and train signs and schedules are now printed in a larger size. And seniors helped improve the light-rail system, which links the downtown to the suburbs and airport. Train conductors were required to pause longer at each stop so that older adults had more time to find a seat.

Elders in Action also started the Ride Wise program. Volunteer "ride ambassadors" escort older people on buses and trains until they feel confident to ride on their own.

The Portland business community has jumped on the livable-community bandwagon. Elders in Action has sent undercover elder volunteers to "shop" at businesses. Evaluators review telephone and customer services and a building's layout and access. The volunteers then suggest possible changes. If a business

meets the group's standards, it gets a window decal noting that it's "Elder-Friendly Certified."

Lorraine Griffey, 71, a retired secretary, is an evaluator. Her late husband had multiple sclerosis and used a wheelchair and scooter. "There were so many places that he absolutely could not get into because the doors wouldn't be wide enough or were difficult to open," she says.

Griffey has evaluated more than 50 stores. She notes that "small changes can have a big impact." Based on her suggestion, one store moved its small containers of dairy products to a lower shelf. Another installed a bench out front so customers could rest. "Businesses forget that people can't be on the go all the time," she says. Also helpful is valet parking at hospitals, shopping centers and public events.

New Seasons Market sports a decal. Besides making structural changes, the food store started an online shopping and delivery service. Claudia Knotek, community-relations manager for the market, says that "the changes are making it easier for seniors, young moms and just everyone."

Walking in a Senior's Shoes

To help sensitize public officials and businesses to the problems faced by the elderly, Elders in Action offers aging-awareness training. Volunteers took elected officials on buses and trains blindfolded or using walkers so they could experience what it's like to be older and handicapped.

Few communities revamp themselves into senior-friendly enclaves without help from nonprofit groups such as Elders in Action. Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, associate director of AARP's state office in Vermont, says the wide range of activities "can't be sustained without organizational support and resources."

In 2006, AARP's Vermont office launched the Burlington Livable Community Project (www.blcp.org). It created a "stakeholder" group that includes the city's housing and parks departments and community organizations such as senior centers and health groups. After meetings involving 1,000 older citizens, the group issued an action plan.

On the housing front, the city promotes a state ordinance that allows accessory apartments or backyard cottages, known as granny flats, in neighborhoods zoned for single-family homes. These units provide privacy to seniors, as well as opportunities for companionship. Burlington also offers bonuses for developers who build senior housing. **K** —LEAH DOBKIN