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PLANNING FOR A MULTIGENERATIONAL FUTURE

By Keith Wardrip

It should come as no surprise that this country's population is aging. Between 2010 and 2050, those over the age of 65 will increase in number from 40 million to 89 million. As shocking as those numbers are, the real surprise is that recent housing construction trends and a general denial of the coming demographic reality have left us unprepared to accommodate our future housing needs. A shift in perspectives and housing policies is required in order for this country to age successfully.

Rather than adjusting to smaller and smaller household sizes, a trend that has persisted since at least the 1970s, new homes have gotten larger and larger. More often than not, these homes have been single-family units in low-density communities poorly served by public transit. The initial price tag, the cost and labor of maintenance, and the auto-dependence of many new communities today make these homes less than ideal for some older adults who no longer drive, who have physical limitations, and who live on reduced or fixed incomes.

Planning for a future that includes an older population cannot ignore the needs and preferences of families with children, however. Nearly one-third of today's households includes a member under the age of 18. So how do we design communities that can appeal to and attract both populations?

A recent survey, in which 64 percent of planners recognized the overlap between the needs of older adults and families with children, suggests that it may not be as difficult as it first appears. Many of the same features that make a community "livable" for older adults – affordable and accessible homes, transportation options, safe and walkable streets, open spaces, convenient shopping and health services – are also important to families with children. There are some differences, of course. For some older adults, ready access to supportive services is essential in order to live independently. For families with children, good schools and convenient child care are important. But by and large, communities that are truly livable work for everyone.

The housing stock and the built environment in many of today's communities pose a myriad of challenges to realizing the goal of livability. Regarding the former, there is a shortage of 3.1 million units affordable and available to renters with extremely low incomes, and the share of renters burdened by their housing costs has risen from 26 percent to 50 percent over the last four decades. Many older adults are rightfully worried about whether or not their homes will be able to



accommodate their changing abilities as they age. And less than one-quarter of recent construction has occurred in central cities, where residential density can support nearby public transit, shopping, and other services.

Can the communities that we developed yesterday be retrofitted for tomorrow? With the right mix of planning and public policy, they can. Recognizing that current resources for affordable housing are scarce, the preservation of today's subsidized housing stock must be a top priority. Supportive services must be provided to older adults who wish to live independently. Home modifications to improve not only accessibility but also energy efficiency must be made affordable to those who would benefit most. And public transit systems that operate frequently throughout the day and provide connections to destinations other than job centers must be available to those who cannot or choose not to rely solely on driving.

How can we apply the lessons of the past to tomorrow's communities? Zoning for and permitting a variety of sizes and types of homes will promote market-rate affordability and respond to a host of housing preferences that are ignored today.

Policies that promote universal design features in new homes can make the housing stock accessible to all, regardless of ability. And a coordination of housing, transportation, and land-use planning will ensure that the communities of tomorrow are livable and sustainable for generations to come.

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