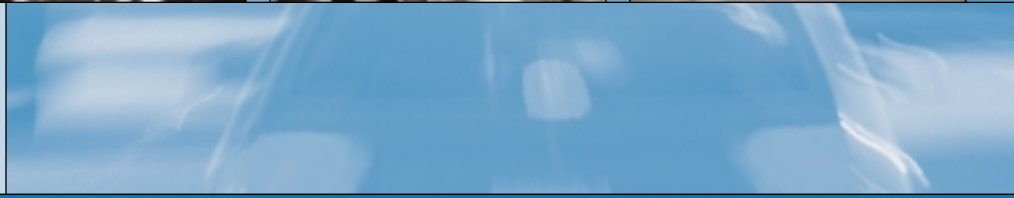


# The Benefits of Public Transportation

## Mobility for the Aging Population



As people age, isolation becomes a growing problem, and access and mobility become increasingly critical needs. For older Americans, affordable, reliable transportation options are essential. Public transportation in various forms provides:

- The ability to live independently
- Access to medical and social services
- Contact with the outside world
- The feeling of belonging to the community

America's aging population is growing at a faster rate than any other U.S. population group, and public transportation systems must continue to be expanded and enhanced to meet this group's needs. Through the commitment of more transportation dollars to public transit systems, the U.S. will be better able to keep pace with the mobility needs of older persons.

**Meeting** the most basic needs of America's older individuals requires enhanced mobility. And the car is not the only travel option. There is a growing recognition of the broad-ranging benefits of public transportation for older Americans, including:

- Greater freedom to live in a variety of settings
- More mobility as a result of more travel choices
- Greater access to varied destinations
- Enhanced opportunities to lead a full and meaningful life

Our national transportation policy can address more comprehensively and more effectively the needs of aging Americans through reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA 21). Reauthorization is the best way to assure that public transportation is adequately funded, more widely available, more accessible and more fully integrated with community-based and human-service transportation services.

## The Demographics

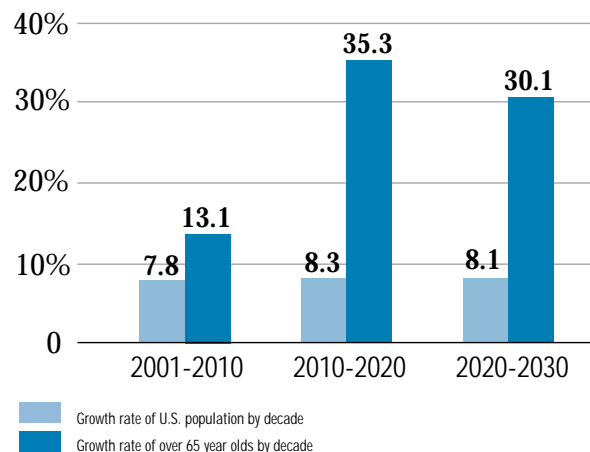
Statistics on the aging of America are dramatic:

- Today, more than 35 million Americans are 65 or older; 4.2 million are 85 or older.<sup>1</sup>
- By 2010, the numbers will rise in both age groups, with the most striking increase in the 85+ age group, which will expand over 30 percent to 5.8 million.<sup>2</sup>
- As America's "baby-boomers" age, the over-65 age group will grow at a rate nearly four times faster than the population as a whole in the two decades from 2010 to 2030.<sup>3</sup>
- By 2030 one out of five people in the U.S. will be age 65 or older.<sup>4</sup>
- More older people now live in suburban settings that lack transit options.<sup>5</sup>

*Through reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA 21), our national transportation policy can address more comprehensively and effectively the needs of America's aging population. Reauthorization provides an immediate opportunity to address these needs by assuring that public transportation is adequately funded, more widely available, more accessible, and more fully integrated with community-based and human-service transportation services.*

Figure 1

### Growth Rate of America's Aging Population



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Projections of the Total Resident Population by 5 Year Age Groups and Sex, with Special Age Categories, Middle Series 1999-2100 (NP-T3)*, [www.census.gov/population/www/projections/natsum.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/natsum.html)

## A Quality of Life Issue

For America's aging population, isolation is a growing problem that severely affects this group's ability to take care of basic needs and function as contributing members of society. And studies show that, as people grow older, isolation—in the form of lack of transportation access and mobility—becomes increasingly acute.

Medical progress has enabled people to live longer, enjoying more years of health and activity. However, this growing population also includes an increasing number of people, particularly among those over 85, with widely varying health and medical conditions that preclude driving and dramatically reduce mobility.

A 2002 AARP study found that:

- Compared to people ages 50 to 74, nearly four times as many people over 85 (41% vs. 12%) had not left home the previous day.<sup>6</sup>
- The percentage of those 85 and over who do not leave their homes at all is three times greater than in the 80-to-84 age group.<sup>7</sup>

Studies also demonstrate a growing dependency on transportation assistance among older individuals. Sixty percent of older Americans expect to depend on rides from friends and family when they can no longer drive.<sup>8</sup> Lack of options and mobility can contribute to isolation.

## Signs of Progress

Both large public transportation agencies and smaller non-profit providers are taking steps to improve transportation options for the aging population. Many public transportation agencies are expanding services in exciting new ways, putting programs and enhancements in place to make public transportation more available and user friendly for older individuals throughout the day.

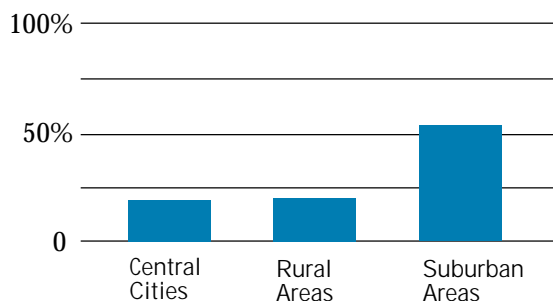
■ **Phoenix, AZ.** With a goal of 100 percent replacement, the Valley Metro System has replaced 80 percent of its entire bus fleet with low-floor vehicles to ease access for older persons. In addition, the system is introducing state-of-the-art information technologies that automatically announce bus stops for riders and identify the route of the bus for waiting passengers. The system is also introducing neighborhood circulator services using small vehicles to allow older users to travel safely between home and busy activity centers and major street and highway corridors.

■ **Charlotte, NC.** Charlotte Transit is undertaking development of a database of bus stop features that will identify elements needing improvement and allow a new trip-planning system to show photographs of stops to riders. In addition, through the Elderly General Purchase Transportation Program, the agency, in cooperation with the Department of Social Services, funds subsidized vouchers for use on local taxis for aging residents who neither live near a bus route nor are eligible for transportation assistance through human service programs.

In addition to these breakthroughs, over 5,200 public and private non-profit providers, nationwide, now offer demand-responsive "paratransit" service to a wide range of clients requiring transportation to human and social services.

Figure 2

### Elderly Place of Residence, 2000



*"Aging in place" has meant that more elderly are living in suburban settings where new transit options must be found.*

Source: Testimony of Ms. Lavada DeSalles, AARP Board Member, before the U.S. Senate Housing and Transportation Subcommittee, Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, July 17, 2002.

■ **Tompkins County, NY.** Gadabout Transportation Services Inc., a non-profit agency, provides transportation services for people age 60+. While Gadabout depends on 45 volunteers for operation, it also pays 11 drivers for transportation services. In 1999, Gadabout provided 49,000 one-way rides on 20 buses.

■ **Loudoun County, VA.** The county, whose aging population experienced an 86% increase between 1990 and 2000, funds four major transportation programs in addition to the service provided by two public providers. Human-service transportation programs, operated by two county departments, include both fixed-route and demand-responsive service, provided through contracts with 6 private taxi-type providers operating approximately 550 trips per day in sedans, station wagons and vans.

■ **Des Moines, IA.** The MTA has introduced a special "On-Call" service to assist aging residents within suburban Johnston—the fastest growing Des Moines-area suburb, with a large concentration of elderly housing—in making trips between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Those wishing rides call roaming On-Call bus drivers directly. In the Urbandale area, similar On-Call service is provided for seniors during rush hour to park-and-ride lots and express bus services. On-Call services promote a direct relationship between customers and drivers, who are encouraged through pay incentives to better serve customers and increase ridership.

■ **Rhode Island.** The Rhode Island Public Transit Authority's (RIPTA) nationally recognized paratransit service—The Ride Program—is coordinated with other specialized human and social services transportation across the state, allowing integration of multiple federal and state funding streams, reduced duplication of service, enhanced productivity and maximum service delivery.

Other communities are organizing grass-roots transportation services for seniors. A 2001 Beverly Foundation/AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety study identified 370 transit programs in rural, urban and suburban areas across the country that are oriented toward helping older persons access medical services, shopping areas, and many recreational and everyday activities that would otherwise be out of reach.<sup>9</sup>

## Need for a Broader Commitment to Ongoing Innovation

While these programs represent exciting breakthroughs, continuing innovations in transit services for aging Americans requires expanded investment and support on a number of fronts.

**System design.** Traditional public transportation systems must continue to be enhanced and designed to make everyday

services more easily available. More older adults, as well as young mothers, children and people with disabilities, could access transit vehicles if more systems implemented designs that are now available, such as:

- Buses that "kneel" at curbside
- Lifts to ease boarding
- Buses and light rail cars with low floors and low-platform boarding

**Community design.** Transit investment must include improvements in community design to increase ease of access to all transportation alternatives and community services. For example, about one in five non-drivers among the aging population could access regular fixed-route bus services if better sidewalks and resting places were provided.

**Advanced technologies.** Increased emphasis must be placed on state-of-the-art information systems to improve information about alternative services and take the anxiety and uncertainty out of trip planning and transit use. Examples include:

- Web-based trip-planning systems, such as The RideGuide system in Washington, D.C., that link route, schedule and fare information for multiple transit systems across metropolitan areas
- State-of-the-art electronic fare systems and multi-trip ticketing, such as stored-value "Smartcards," that ease and speed the boarding process, taking the guesswork out of paying fares and ultimately allowing riders to use a single electronic ticket on a variety of regional transportation services
- Real-time vehicle arrival and departure information at transit stops, such as systems in Washington, DC and Salt Lake City rail stations, to reduce rider uncertainty about schedules and conditions on the system

**Coordination of services.** Coordination of services and joint investment between transit providers and other human service and community service programs must be encouraged and rewarded, not frustrated or discouraged. For example, in North Carolina service coordination is carried out across each of the state's 100 counties by partnering at the county level in the delivery of small urban and rural transit services through jointly developed plans.

## An Achievable Goal

While transit agency and community programs are demonstrating that innovation and determination can stretch limited transit dollars and help make public transportation user friendly to older people, more must be done. What's needed is forward thinking and coordination that allows municipalities to accommodate the needs of the aging population into the designs of their transit systems and their communities—and

the funding to follow through on their ideas.

TEA 21 is critical to this effort. In the months ahead, local, state and national elected officials will have a unique opportunity to expand the reach and quality of public transportation for older Americans through the reauthorization of this legislation.

For more information on how to communicate the extraordinary value of transit for America's aging population, contact your:

- Local transit systems
- Local human service agencies
- State transit associations
- The American Public Transportation Association

## Works Cited

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