

Housing, transportation on minds of aging

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Burlington residents who are older than 50 don't like being defined by their age.

They see transportation as a key element in their quality of life and preserving independence. They'd like to see more housing options, including those that are age-diverse and affordable to the middle class. They are also passionate about remaining connected to the community in which they live.

These are among the findings of the Burlington Livable Community Project. The collaboration between AARP Vermont and the city of Burlington was launched in December 2005 as a way to plan for the demands an aging population will place on the city, its residents and resources.

The completed report was presented Tuesday during a news conference at Fletcher Free Library.

"Our research reveals much of what is attractive about Burlington, as well as where there are gaps," said Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, assistant director of AARP Vermont. "It will help inform policy makers, planners, service providers, residents and stakeholder organizations as we work to address these issues."

AARP has committed up to \$1 million over 10 years to develop a vision and devise recommendations in the areas of housing, transportation and mobility and community engagement, Wallace-Brodeur said.

The project takes on special significance as the nation's first baby boomers turn 60. Between 2000 and 2010, state AARP officials predicted a 50 percent increase in the number of Burlington residents ages between 55 and 65. Statewide, the number of people over 65 will double by 2030, according to AARP data.

According to the findings of focus groups and a public opinion survey, 90 percent of Burlington residents older than 45 want to stay in their current homes and neighborhoods for as long as possible. And for those who need to move, residents say, there should be a range of affordable options available to reflect the diversity of the physical, lifestyle and political needs of people over older than 50.

On regarding transportation, residents said they want more places to sit along sidewalks, better lighting and better sidewalk maintenance.

The report also revealed that Burlington's aging population, particularly those people in Burlington's middle class, is generally well-connected to the community. Those with lower incomes, however, said there need to be more educational, volunteer and recreational activity opportunities.

Many of the two dozen people who attended Tuesday's meeting were among those who participated in the project's focus groups and survey of 800 Burlington residents, age 45 and

older. Jean Forden, a 75-year-old city resident, expressed her disgust with age-related stereotypes.

"I hate that word, 'aged,' " Forden chimed in during the presentation. "Somehow the word 'aged' makes me feel like I should bring out my cane. That and the word 'elderly' are the most awful words that were ever invented."

Michael Monte, director of Community and Economic Development for the city, attended the news conference.

"From the city's perspective, it seems that most elderly folks in the city are doing OK, and that they're decently satisfied with issues around mobility, housing and civic engagement," Monte said. "It's also clear to us there's a lot more we can be doing to address the needs of elderly folks, especially people who want to remain in homes but are looking for alternatives."

Currently Lacking in Burlington, said Monte, are what he called settled senior housing communities, in which where seniors can live independently but remain connected to their community and to their peers.

The next step, said Wallace-Brodeur, will be for AARP to present the report to the Burlington City Council in April.

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