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Girding for an aging population

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With the oldest baby boomers entering their 60s, don't expect their generation to go quietly into old-age oblivion. In their middle age they made their imprint on politics and popular culture, so it was only a matter of time before they started weighing in from an elderly point of view on one of Burlington's favorite preoccupations -- livability.

Nearly 1-in-5 Burlingtonians was 55 or older in 2005, and elderly numbers are swelling as the boomers' famous demographic bulge moves through the population. Now comes AARP -- an organization that reaches out to everyone 50 and older -- with a report more than a year in the making about how to make Burlington more "livable" for older people during the next 10 years.

Boomers weren't the only older people consulted for this report, which focused on housing, transportation/mobility and "civic engagement," but they promise to be principal beneficiaries of anything that improves these circumstances for seniors through 2016, when most of them will be older than 50.

The research underpinning the report drew on focus groups, an 800-person telephone poll, study groups and volunteers who examined conditions for pedestrians. AARP Vermont spearheaded and paid for the exercise, called the Burlington Livable Community Project, at a cost of more than \$125,000. The project enlisted cooperation from 30 "stakeholder" organizations (six of them city departments), some of which were represented at a news conference in City Hall with AARP's Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, who announced the release of the report.

Chris Cole, general manager of the Chittenden County Transportation Authority, said that work on the project had been "eye-opening" in making clear the transportation needs of seniors and that his organization has implemented some recommendations. For example, all new buses will be "low-floor" models, without steps, to make them more accessible from curbside. He said efforts were being made to improve public outreach and to begin offering bus passes for purchase online. Cole added that Sunday service has been revised, largely to address needs of the elderly.

As for housing, Kirby Dunn of HomeShare Vermont echoed the report's call for a "housing plan" for seniors. Too often in the past, she said, the elderly population has gotten "short shrift" when it came to housing policy. Given that about 90 percent of older people say they want to remain in their own homes, she said, one of the key challenges in the next few years will be to provide the services necessary to make that possible.

With respect to "engagement," Dolly Fleming of Community of Vermont Elders said the city's goal should be to draw on older people's talents and expertise as participants in civic life, not simply as recipients of services.

Many of the report's recommendations -- affordable housing, for example, or improved sidewalks

and pedestrian crossings -- would affect and benefit the population at large, not just older people.

Some proposals -- such as, "provide more assisted living residences" or "generate a range of housing options" -- could take years to implement, Wallace-Brodeur acknowledged, but some could be put on a faster track. For example, "time crosswalk signals throughout the city to ensure adequate amount of time for older residents to cross streets."

Mayor Bob Kiss said the report reflects a "commitment to put people first," and that he expects to see real results from sustained initiatives.

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