

Growing Older in a Livable City

**A REPORT ON FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS
WITH BURLINGTON CITIZENS (Age 50+)**



December 2006



Acknowledgements

AARP Vermont contracted with the Snelling Center for Government in 2006 to conduct focused conversations with Burlington residents age 50 and older and analyze the data collected from these conversations. This report was prepared by Heidi Klein with assistance from Glenn McRae and Melinda Davis at the Snelling Center for Government and Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur at AARP Vermont. Additional assistance was provided by Katherine Bridges, Senior Research Advisor for AARP. For more information contact Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur at 802-224-1113.



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Executive Summary

During September 2006, The Snelling Center for Government convened a series of seven focused conversations with community members aged 50+ for the Burlington Livable Community Project. These conversations are one part of a multifaceted strategy to engage the members of the community in identifying opportunities to ensure Burlington is a great place to grow older and is a livable city for all ages. This report is a summary of some of the key themes from these conversations.

The focused conversations set out to identify potential options for improving Burlington's community design and services for an aging population. The discussion sessions began by identifying the reasons why residents chose and want to stay in Burlington along with what might prompt them to leave. The sessions then moved to a deeper exploration of issues related to housing, mobility, and community engagement. The discussions yielded a number of concrete suggestions that were subsequently tested out, through a telephone survey, with a statistically representative sample of Burlington residents. Of equal, if not greater, value from the discussions was capturing how the participants talked about their experience of growing older and about some of the cultural attitudes toward the older population that they encounter and seek to change.

Growing Older: Burlington's age 50+ residents are extremely diverse. Participants resisted being defined primarily by their age. Instead, they made distinctions based on cognitive and physical ability, personal lifestyle, and politics. This resistance may stem from participants' desire to distance themselves from the personal and cultural perception of aging and of elders as burdens to others and to society. Participants clearly wish to be engaged, recognized, valued, and useful as individuals—and as community assets—rather than as part of a population with needs requiring services. Participants also articulated a deep desire for community and personal connections to alleviate loneliness, to prevent isolation, and to create relationships of mutual aid. These themes infused the discussions of housing, mobility, and community engagement.

The City: Participants expressed their love of Burlington and their intention to stay due to its natural beauty, access to the lake, community activism, cultural offerings, academic vibrancy, small scale, and the chance for one person to make a difference. The few participants who intend to leave mentioned: winter weather, noise, the perceived competition with students for housing and sidewalks, lack of affordable housing for elders (especially for the middle class), cost of living and rising taxes, and the need for family support.

Housing: The clearest message from the discussion on housing is that participants want options that reflect the diversity of the 50+ population in their lifestyles, personalities, politics and needs. Many, if not most, participants stated their desire to stay in their homes for as long as possible or to explore multi-generational housing where people connect based on shared interest rather than age. Participants noted interest in a range of shared housing options including: single family home w/non-relatives together, co-

housing/cooperative housing, apartments/condos by shared interests. The biggest gaps in housing noted were: one floor living, affordable assisted living, and options for the middle class in Burlington. The discussion of housing inevitably uncovered the desire for a sense of home, community, and connection. Many spoke of neighborliness and vibrant neighborhoods with people connected to one another and to goods and services.

Mobility: Participants were asked to share their experiences in being able to get where they want and/or need to go. The ability to walk downtown is a major attraction in Burlington, though city sidewalks, crosswalks, and crossing lights are a problem. Also, elders compete for use of the sidewalks with many other walkers, bicycle riders, and skateboarders, who do not yield. For many, driving is considered a necessity as walking becomes more challenging. Driving also continues to be considered a vital link to one's independence and freedom—two core values. Public transportation is an option for some, and overall it was praised (cost, drivers, easy entry) but pronounced too limited in route and schedule and not user-friendly. Participants urged the consideration of ride sharing not only to meet the need for increased mobility but also to increase community connection for potentially isolated members of our community. They noted the critical connection between mobility and ability to remain active in community life.

Community Engagement: Participants shared many ideas related to the cultural, civic, and volunteer opportunities in Burlington. Embedded in these discussions was a deep appreciation for the rich cultural life in the city coupled with perceptions about community attitudes and biases towards seniors that limited meaningful connection and engagement of seniors as vibrant contributors to community life. Burlington is praised for the numerous cultural events offered. Notable gaps were events and activities targeted to and/or accessible by elders at the waterfront and the lack of opportunities for “active seniors” and “the physically and cognitively able.” Participants also praised the ease with which one could be engaged and the ability to access decision-makers. These were important draws for choosing Burlington and central to participants wanting to remain in the city. Volunteer opportunities were mentioned as ways by which seniors can remain engaged in community life—not as a means of providing service to seniors, but rather to share their skills, abilities, expertise, and personal assets in creating a better community. While some spoke of the desire for new or expanded cultural events, a critical underlying theme was the desire to connect with others who share similar interests and/or life experiences, to contribute to civic and cultural life in Burlington, and to remain useful.

Continuing the Discussion—Changing Times and Changing Attitudes: We are in a time of change pushed by changing demographics, the coming of age of a generation with different life experiences and attitudes, and new technologies. Today's seniors (defined here as the 50+ population) include a significant portion of seniors who are active (both physically and politically), computer literate, single, and without extended family ties in Burlington. Planning for this population presents a new challenge—from expectations of going out in the winter that presume safe sidewalks and streets, to the need for new ways to create networks of “family” to provide connection and care.

Planning and community design in the future needs to be informed by these cultural changes as well as by a shift in cultural attitudes about growing older and the aged. Many of the discussion participants spoke of negative cultural attitudes and biases about our older residents, which discount the contributions they can continue to make in the community.

Based on what we heard in this first set of discussions with members of the community, some key questions to consider in further discussions and planning efforts include:

1. How will we change the way we think and talk about aging and members of the aging population?
2. How can Burlington residents, officials, and service providers promote the reinvigoration and/or development of neighborhoods as a place of connection? What policies, services, community features, or practices would increase neighborliness?
3. What will be needed to support people in their homes and communities? What combination of "neighborliness," informal or organized voluntary action, and agency-provided service will be needed? How can we ensure this mix is in place?
4. How will we engage our aging residents in community life?
5. How will we engage our aging residents as vital assets in creating a livable community?

Participants generally reflected that whatever approaches are selected for improving the City, it should be informed by an asset-based community development approach to creating a livable community for all ages. Burlington is rich in assets, including the skills of all of its citizens, the dedication of its citizen's associations, and the resources of its governmental and civic institutions. Instead of focusing on the community's needs, deficiencies, and problems—or "providing services" to elders who are "needy"—an asset-based community development approach will mobilize community strengths, facilitate community connections, engage our aging residents as community assets, and encourage the self-reliance Burlington's 50+ population seeks.

"When you get old, you're no longer who you were...nobody knows you except as an old person. The fact is, we have a treasure trove of experience and interesting things that could be shared."

—*Focused discussion group participant*

Introduction and Methodology

As part of The Burlington Livable Community Project sponsored by the City of Burlington and AARP Vermont, The Snelling Center for Government convened a series of focused conversations with community members aged 50+. These conversations are one part of a multifaceted strategy to engage the members of the community in identifying opportunities to ensure Burlington is a great place to grow older and is a livable city for all ages.

Through previous research nationally and here in Vermont, we have learned that there are five primary concerns that are often raised as Vermonters think about aging: health care, high costs of living, long-term care, the general availability of employment, and adequate finances. These critical issues are being addressed in other forums statewide. The project conveners therefore chose to focus on community design and on three important contributors to healthy aging and quality of life: mobility, housing, and community engagement.

The purpose of this set of interviews was to elicit a greater understanding of what makes Burlington a good city in which to grow older, and to identify some concrete actions that we could take to make it even better. The goal of the focus groups was to identify preliminary themes and areas in need of exploration with the full diversity of Burlington's 50+ residents. These themes were then tested out through a telephone survey with a statistically representative sample of Burlington residents. An equal, if not greater, value from the discussions was capturing how the participants talked about their experience of growing older and some of the cultural attitudes toward the older population that they encounter and seek to change.

As part of their orientation, participants were asked to complete a brief survey prior to the sessions (Appendix A). This survey was designed to gather preliminary data as well as set the frame for the discussions. Generally the responses demonstrated a positive feeling about living in Burlington, but with some specific and serious concerns around safety and the availability of future housing options once residents no longer were able to stay in their own homes.

The discussion sessions began by identifying the reasons residents chose and want to stay in Burlington, along with what might prompt them to leave. The sessions then moved to a deeper exploration of issues related to housing, mobility, and community engagement. The following is a sample of the questions:

- *What is needed to be in place to make Burlington your city of choice to live in as you grow older?*
- *If a move was/is needed, what factors/features would be important in choosing housing?*

- *How do you get to where you want or need to go? If there comes a time when you can't drive any more, or perhaps you don't drive now, how does this change your life?*
- *What are some of the ways in which you are engaged in community life? What would make it easier for you to take part in community activities?*

The discussions were audio-taped and then transcribed. The full questioning guide and an outline of results are included in this report's appendices (Appendix B and C, respectively). This report provides a summary only and is not intended to be a detailed reporting of session proceedings.

Themes from the Community Discussions

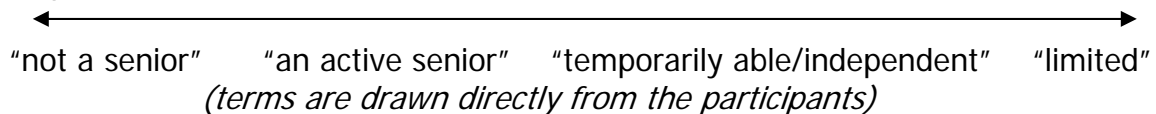
The following are some of the emergent themes from a series of seven focus group interviews held with residents of Burlington, age 50+, during September 2006.

"I used to say I was in my young 70's, and then I'd say I'm in my middle old age. And now I say I am in my old old age and I ain't seen nothing yet...but it's a different existence."

—85-year-old participant

Growing Older—The Context

Burlington's 50+ residents are extremely diverse, and age does not seem to be an appropriate indicator in segmenting this population. Perhaps the following continuum of self-perception is useful:



Those who represented the more "active" side of the continuum expressed their resistance to being considered "old":

"I haven't gotten myself in that senior mentality yet."

"It kills me to go into City Market and tell them I'm old to get a 5 percent discount."

"If you have to take the bus...why do I have to say: "I'm old [in order to get a discount]?"

Those in the middle or the more “limited” side of the continuum spoke of their experience with aging:

“The older I get, the more invisible I become.”

“Well, I just know that if you complain about things, it’s, ‘You’re old.’ And the young people don’t have the same respect for elders that we had.”

Seniors clearly do not want to be seen as needing help or being “needy”:

“A lot of people get tired of feeling like they’re a burden. Oh, I’ve got to ask for help again.”—participant who no longer drives

“...because elders as individuals tend to be polite and don’t want people to know that we can’t solve these things ourselves.”

“...[If] somebody says ‘you’re a caregiver’ and my client says ‘I don’t need care.’ So, I always say I am a driver.”—participant who provides services to older Burlington resident

Participants strongly resisted any type of categorization or labeling as “seniors” or “elders.” This may be partly due to negative community or self-perceptions of aging, and to concerns about discrimination based on age. Participants wish to be engaged, recognized, valued, and useful—as community assets rather than individuals with needs requiring services and, therefore, a burden to others and society.

“When you get old, you’re no longer who you were...nobody knows you except as an old person. The fact is we have a treasure trove of experience and interesting things that could be shared.”

—*Focused discussion group participant*

The resistance to labeling may also stem from the desire to be recognized as individuals and to connect with others based on shared interests and life experiences rather than the number of years lived. Many participants articulated a desire for positive multi-generational and community connections.

Community Features—Why Residents Choose Burlington and Want to Stay:

Many participants expressed their love of Burlington and their intention to stay. While some first came to Burlington through job opportunities or by happenstance, many purposely chose Burlington due to its natural beauty, access to the lake, community activism, cultural offerings, and academic vibrancy. Burlington offered more than a small town, but its scale (compared to other metropolitan areas) provided safety, community

connection, and the chance for one person to make a difference. A number of participants moved into Burlington's downtown from other parts of Vermont or the U.S. as part of their "downsizing" and retirement. They were attracted by the walk-ability of the city, the access to the lake and bike path and the cultural vibrancy.

"The size of the city...the fact that it isn't a big metropolis, means you can get to other places really easily, too. You can get to rural areas, the country, the mountains, and the hiking and skiing and all that...It does have a lot of things that big cities offer, but it's more manageable in a lot of ways. And it's not overwhelming or threatening."

"Burlington is like a little metropolis, very cosmopolitan...it has a lot to offer for a small city."

"I love Lake Champlain...I go down there every evening and I look and I say 'this is why I am here.' The lake is such a valuable asset, and the Adirondacks in the background...the natural beauty of this area is just overwhelming sometimes."

"I'd like to acknowledge the [City] Administration of Burlington. I just think they've done a tremendous amount to set a [positive] tone—they have to keep things vibrant but small scale and encourage neighborhoods."

"If you are the kind of person that feels like you need to make a difference, Burlington is a place where you can make a difference. You can volunteer to make a difference or work and make a difference. What you do can show."

Community Features — Why Some Residents Might Go: Few participants expressed a desire or intent to leave. Those who did mentioned the following contributing factors: winter weather; noise from pedestrians in the downtown area, near UVM and Champlain College, and from emergency vehicles in the North End; the perceived competition with students for housing and sidewalks; lack of affordable housing for elders (especially for the middle class); cost of living and rising taxes, which are especially hard for individuals on fixed income; and the need for family support.

Community Features — Downtown/City Core: Burlington's downtown neighborhoods and residents have some unique attributes and accompanying concerns. Many downtown residents spoke about the dynamics that come with a large university and college population—the important contribution in creating a vibrant cultural and intellectual community combined with the large influx of temporary residents and the crowded streets and sidewalks.

"We have a huge influx of students all the time, and I think some don't view themselves as real members of this community."

"One of the things that I would move for is the fact that you cannot...open your windows for fresh air. You have to use the air conditioner in order to cut the noise down somewhat...there are times that you can't sleep at night with the windows open in the downtown."

There is also a perception of high demand for access to downtown and perhaps limited resources for differing sub-populations.

"There's several groups that are competing...for the same resource. And older people do not want to drive so much and want to be very close to city services, but also low income folks who don't have cars...are wanting to live closer to the city center. You've got all these people who want to live close to the city center, so how can you, again, design neighborhoods so that seniors can live with the new immigrant population, can live with college students, and everybody is going to be happy together, because there's not enough city center for every group to have its segregated space."

Housing

The clearest message from the discussion on housing is that participants want options that reflect the diversity of the 50+ population in their lifestyles, personalities, politics, and personal needs. The progression of options most talked about today, according to participants, is generally:

Staying "at home" → home share → downsizing → senior living → assisted living and adapting

Many, if not most, participants stated their desire to stay in their homes for as long as possible, and a number have explored adapting the space to one floor living and creating access for wheelchairs. They recognized that even with these accommodations, staying "at home" would require bringing in a variety of services for things like home maintenance and personal assistance/care.

Some viewed **downsizing** as an advantage in terms of reducing home maintenance:

"We don't want to be a slave to our property...so at some point, we are going to need to downsize, simplify. It must be nice when you have a space you really take care of and still do other things."

"And I did everything for my condo that I did in my individual home, my house. And when I sold it, I gave up all those awful chores that kept me on the ladder all the time. And it's wonderful to have it done for me."—*participant / resident at McCauley Square*

Others expressed an interest in **shared housing** as a way of sharing resources, connecting with others, and preventing isolation:

“...you and your husband have each other, but a lot of us—as we get older and much, much older—don’t. We have the potential for isolation. I think the idea of house sharing...has tons of potential.”

Participants noted an interest in exploring and creating a range of shared housing options including: single family home with non-relatives living together; co-housing/cooperative housing; apartments/condos, with residents of the same age or affinity group (shared interests).

New models that participants discussed as valuable additions to the continuum of housing options to be considered included: co-housing/cooperative housing, multigenerational self-sufficient neighborhoods.

Some positive examples of new housing were the Flynn Avenue Coop, Burlington Co-housing, and McCauley Square.

“I feel as though I’ve met what I consider the perfect housing situation for myself in this last third of my life, hopefully. It’s a community. It’s a cooperative, so it’s automatic community because everyone has to participate...safety...limited equity...28 units...community room...courtyard for children to play.”—*resident in Flynn Avenue Coop*

The biggest **gaps in housing** noted were situations that afforded one floor living, affordable assisted living, and options for the middle class in Burlington.

“I think in Burlington we have a critical need for assisted living which is affordable to the average individual.”

“Because of my disabilities, I wasn’t able to maintain my house and I sold that...I’m considered [*as living in*] temporary housing, or without housing, because I had this situation where I am living as a caregiver. So it’s like waiting for a kidney transplant...waiting for someone else to move on.”

“There’s things Burlington has to offer if you have really great resources. You can find a terrific place to live. And I think if you are in a poverty situation, you can find some place to live. But that middle—when I sell my house to downsize, where am I going to go?”

Senior housing complexes, as they are now, for the most part were not attractive to participants unless they found a sense of connection, or commonality with other residents.

"...I feel like people get lost in those things [larger senior housing complexes]. And unless you're an activist, an active member and go to all the activities they have, how do you get to know other people?"

"I'm thinking that one requirement [to be happy in senior living] needs to be common interests...I'm not thinking in terms of planned activities. I'm thinking in terms of background of the people—professional and life-long experience and aesthetic pursuits which they have in common, rather than bingo."

While some participants expressed interest in housing segregated by age, most participants want to age in a **multi-generational setting** or community.

"I'd love to see us not warehouse our elders... to see communities where neighborhoods are more integrated—and the housing is integrated."

"Fifteen years from now, we're going to look back on this moment and go, 'What in the Name of God were we thinking [in separating people by age]?' Because...if you look at the new models, what we're really talking about is going back to old-fashioned neighborhoods."

The discussion of housing inevitably uncovered the desire for participants' living situations to provide a sense of home, community, and connection. Many spoke of **neighborliness** and **vibrant neighborhoods** where residents shared a sense of connection to one another and had various mechanisms by which they come together and/or share information (e.g., neighborhood block party, email connection).

"One of the reasons I love where I live is that my neighborhood is a real neighborhood...there's a real sense of community...I know that there are lots of people who know my comings and goings and that I have dinner with, and they pop in."

"...[W]e've developed a culture that's moved away from this [neighborhoods], so I don't know how easy or possible it is to do now...if we're able to walk out our door and have a local grocery store and a little place where we get food... to create relationships. And we need places where people can sit and visit."

"I know this is idealist. I'd really love to see things less about centers and more about neighborhoods. I mean, like are we aware of the people in our neighborhoods who might need help shoveling out their driveway?"

Participants also mentioned *neighborhood* in the context of local economics and the desire to be close to shops/services not only for goods and services, but also for the informal connections that can be made.

Mobility and Accessibility

Mobility is critical to accessing community resources and services and to remaining engaged in community life. Participants expressed frustration when confronted with limited mobility and transportation, as it leads to loss of independence and isolation.

Driving continues to be considered a vital link to one's **independence and freedom**—two core values.

"...[S]he gave up her car way too early...She could use it to go to supermarket and back, or the library and back during the day. And she'd have her mobility and freedom. But right now, she's stuck and just has to wait until somebody helps her out. And I'd hate to be in that spot."

Participants also had a lot to say about pedestrian life and public transportation. The **ability to walk downtown** is a major attraction in Burlington, however city sidewalks and crossing lights are a problem. **Sidewalks** are often uneven and, depending on the season, unraked or unshoveled, preventing access to the curb and parking meters. Also, elders compete for use of the sidewalks with young walkers, bicycle riders, and skateboarders, who do not yield. Crosswalks are not safe as there is not enough time to cross at traffic lights and drivers do not yield to pedestrians.

"Getting across the street where there is no traffic light...the sidewalks, the overhanging trees, the bushes, the people who don't pay attention to pedestrians...the increasing number of bicycles on sidewalks...the bus schedules are difficult, no Sunday buses. We can't go anywhere...there are so many little things that nobody...things that are daily obstacles for me."—*participant who lives in the Old North End without a car*

"I take the car to places I could walk because getting across the street is so difficult."—*participant who must cross Shelburne Road*

"I would like to make sure there are complete streets. In other words, if you're in a wheelchair, there's [sic] streets and all the streets allow you to get around."

For many driving is considered a necessity as walking becomes more challenging. But what happens when driving becomes too difficult?

"Well, I find I drive more because I can't walk."

"I think we have to remember that even if we're driving, we probably won't be driving forever—that we need to get things ready for when we can't drive, when we're not as mobile. Because I'm temporarily-abled—if you know what I mean. It's not a permanent state."

"I've seen the SSTA buses and I think those are a good service. But when we—all the baby boomers—get to the point when we need service, I'm not sure that will be sufficient."

Public transportation is an option for some, and overall it was praised (cost, drivers, easy entry), but it was pronounced too limited in route and schedule. Most notable were lack of service within neighborhoods, and in the evenings and on Sundays when many cultural/community events occur. Additionally, participants noted the lack of benches and posted schedules, both of which make waiting difficult.

"I'm in an area where you have to get to where the bus stops...I would have to have someone take me there. I can't walk that far at this point...Other people live in a large residential area that's off the main lines for the buses. If they have any kind of disability, how do they get to where the bus is?"

"And I would imagine the bus company must tear its hair that they have to run an empty bus. I really think we have to look at the fact that transportation shouldn't just be on a grid...It has to interact with the times of day, the numbers of people, and I don't see that happening so much."

"I felt that if public transportation were smaller and were more responsive to my need to get to a particular place, I might be more inclined to use it."

Public transportation can work, and one participant outlined an experience that illustrated what others in the group thought was an ideal situation (*italics added for emphasis*):

"While I was still working...I thought the bus was great. I mean, I *walked half a block*. I had a little *shelter* to sit in and wait for the bus. I'd get on and it didn't matter what the *weather* was; I'd get on and he'd plow through the water, ice, snow, and I didn't have to start my car. I *didn't have to park* it downtown. I'd get off within a half block of where I worked, and *I got to know the people* who were taking the same bus downtown...and coming home would be the same thing. Almost the same crowd of people would be coming home. You know, you got to know each other."

Mobility of the Future: Many participants recognized the importance of mobility and transportation. They also noted the connection between improving mobility and transportation options and creating a sustainable, healthy, and livable community based on promoting both ecological and health goals.

"What really bugs me, the message is two-toned...The message is don't drive, too many cars on the road; it's hurting the environment; it's ruining your lungs. And then, okay, get across the street if you possibly can because you're holding up traffic."

"If, in fact, part of making this a livable city is de-emphasizing the automobile... then it's up to the leadership to create the public relations, the marketing campaign to get people's consensus and excitement about public transportation being a thing for all people. And then you make shelters so that an elder doesn't have to wait. And you make schedules more available so that people are aware when the bus is coming."

"Dr. William Thomas talks about the three plagues of old age as loneliness, depression and boredom. And I think that what we are talking about here is how to create communities that not only deal with those plagues but offer a way of life that is inclusive and forward thinking."
—Focused discussion group participant

Community Engagement

Discussion participants shared many ideas related to the cultural, civic, and volunteer opportunities in Burlington. Embedded in these discussions was a deep appreciation for the rich cultural life in Burlington coupled with perceptions about community attitudes and biases towards seniors that limited meaningful community connection and engagement of seniors as vibrant contributors to community life.

“...[I]f people in their middle age could think ahead to old age, to get involved through volunteering or do things, being in groups, support groups, go to church, become more active in your middle years to sort of prepare yourself for the later years...it might be easier when they are 86.”

—*Focused discussion group participant*

Burlington is praised for the numerous **cultural events** offered, including: Flynn Center productions, Lyric Theater, the Lane Series; community celebrations like Mardi Gras and First Night; educational opportunities linked to colleges; and the range of fine arts.

A number of participants noted the **lack of opportunities for “active seniors” and “the physically and cognitively able,”** such as drop-in tennis leagues or Elder Education Enrichment (EEE), and the lack of activities targeted to and/or accessible by elders at the waterfront.

Only some participants were aware of the variety of programmatic and cultural activities offered through the senior centers, and for some these carried with them a perception that the events were for “those people” (e.g., old, poor, disabled), and not for them.

“(It’s) nice to put a building—nice to have programs for people who are challenged—but what about activities for those who are not challenged?”

It was also apparent that many are not aware of the full range of community offerings beyond the senior centers. In the discussions, participants shared information about some event or service and expressed frustration that there is **no central listing for seniors**.

Burlington was also praised for the **ease of civic engagement** and the ability to access decision-makers. These were important draws for choosing Burlington and were central to the desire to remain in the city.

“...[It is] quite easy to get involved in the neighborhood and the city. And I liked the fact that I knew my city councilors and I knew my state representatives, and that some of them would sit and talk for two hours...This brought a little vitality into our lives.” “It’s very easy to make a difference...there’s one degree of separation between any of us and the governor of this state...and the neighborhood councils are a way for citizens to participate, no matter who they are, and to make—to really make—a difference. And that is democracy at its best, really.”

Similarly, participants spoke highly of the **volunteer opportunities** in the community.

“If you are the kind of person that feels like you need to make a difference, Burlington is a place where you can make a difference. You can volunteer to make a difference or work and make a difference. What you do can show.”

It is important to note that volunteer opportunities were referred to as ways seniors can remain engaged in community life and not as a means of providing service to seniors.

Continued community engagement **is intertwined with personal mobility and access to transportation**. Lack of transportation and fear of driving in town at night were also mentioned as major deterrents to participation in both cultural events and civic life:

“One of the things that I’ve been irked ... is they seem to think that all life stops after the last bus at 6:15. ...if you’re an activist and you want to go to City Hall meetings, you want to go to church for meetings, you want to go to the movies, you want to go visit friends, you want to go out to dinner or the gallery, or whatever you want to do.”

“It’s gotta be ‘Mozart on Wheels’...culture on wheels...for hooking people up who want to go do things...Could the Mozart festival have a page on their website that was about people connecting to people who want rides and are willing to give rides? It works for the Mozart festival because it gives them more people.”

For those who are **house-bound**, engagement and connection are vital. The connection, however, needs to be respectful and meaningful.

“But sometimes you can’t get out. So there should be ways that we can get the input of those who are housebound...there can be jobs like stuffing envelopes,...so people could stay where they are and feel that they are doing something useful.”

“It’s wonderful to have the voice choirs come [into senior housing, nursing homes, etc.]. But they [the residents] are being entertained. They’re being patronized a great deal...in a sense, it puts them on a different kind of level.”

Participants stressed their desire for a mutual exchange and not to be patronized based on their age or others’ perceptions of them as needing assistance. A persistent theme was the desire to be recognized and engaged as individuals who bring ideas, skills, and energy to community life. A critical underlying theme was the desire to connect with others sharing similar interests or life experiences, and to continue their contribution to civic and cultural life in Burlington.

* * *

Actions Suggested by Participants

Participants offered a number of specific suggestions for creating a livable community. The following is a short summary of those suggestions within the categories of inquiry: housing, mobility, community engagement. This was an attempt to draw out some of the most common ideas and to consolidate similar thoughts. Additional detail can be found in Appendix C, “An Outline of the Conversations and Results.”

Housing Suggestions to Allow People to “Age in Place”:

- Community building that matches services—e.g., drivers w/non-drivers; young to shovel w/frail elders
- Reliable personal care assistants, companions, and maintenance workers
- Loans for adapting housing as ability changes
- Neighborhood networks of shared services (e.g., Beacon Hill, MA)

Housing Suggestions:

- Choices/variety of options—housing options should reflect the diversity of seniors
- Location and context essential—connected to others, services, neighbors, consider putting new housing in shopping centers
- Accessory apartments, e.g., Elder Cottage Housing Opportunities
- Good news housing—put some proceeds from sale of home into annuity; the interest pays rent, and the principle is used to renovate homes for others who want to stay where they are

Mobility Suggestions:

- Resting spots—benches along bike path, other walking routes, and at bus stops
- Traffic signals that truly enable crossing safely by stopping all traffic; use visual and auditory signals
- Sidewalks designated for pedestrian traffic only, and well maintained
- Special shuttles for community gatherings, cultural offerings, shopping areas
- Ride sharing and matching so elders do not need to “ask” and be a burden
- More Park-and-Ride options for downtown events for elders who don’t like traffic
- Mini-buses or vans, instead of large buses, that can go through neighborhoods
- On-demand system for those who donate their cars (e.g., Madison, WI)
- Market public transport as environmentally friendly, community connection for all not just transport—market as part of sustainable and healthy living

Community Engagement/Connection Suggestions:

- Community and civic organizations adopt policy and practice of outreach to elders
- Event permitting to require applicant response to: “How are you helping accessibility/transportation to event”
- Discount tickets for elders, or “same day” pricing for events that are not sold out
- FrontPorch.com—connecting neighbors to one another; sharing local information; referrals to service providers
- Regular column in local paper for elders on activities and opportunities

- Websites for elders—"My Old Space"
- Resource book for elders listing events, opportunities, and services
- Welcome wagon for new community members

Basic City Design Suggestions

- More benches for resting
- Public restrooms (even if they are "pay" facilities)
- Better lighting in garages and parking lots

* * *

Where is this discussion taking us? Changing attitudes, changing times...

Both project conveners and discussion participants noted we are in a time of change pushed by changing demographics, the coming of age of a generation with different life experiences and attitudes, and new technologies.

Today's seniors (defined here as the 50+ population) include a significant segment who are active seniors (both physically and politically), computer literate, single and without extended family ties in Burlington. Planning for this population presents a new challenge—from expectations of going out in the winter, which presumes safe sidewalks and streets, to the need for new ways to create networks of “family” to provide connection and care. Planning and community design in the future needs to be informed by these cultural changes as well as by a shift in cultural attitudes about growing older and the aged.

As we continue to consider how to make Burlington a livable city, there are a number of key questions to explore in greater depth through community dialogues among residents, planners, and policy makers:

1. How will we change the way we think and talk about aging and members of the aging population?

As previously noted, many of the discussion participants spoke of negative cultural attitudes and biases about our older residents that discount the skills, experiences, knowledge, and contributions they can bring to the community. Participants also spoke of their desire to remain independent and not become “a burden” to their families and communities. We need to change the way we think and talk about this vital segment of our community.

2. How can Burlington residents, officials and service providers promote the reinvigoration and/or development of neighborhoods as a place of connection? What policies, services, community features, or practices would increase neighborliness?

Participants spoke of recapturing or recreating “neighborhood” and “neighborliness” in their discussions of housing, mobility, and community engagement. Vibrant neighborhoods can:

- increase human connection to prevent isolation and alleviate loneliness
- create networks of mutual aid by which we each help each other as we are able, and seniors are recognized as positive contributors
- increase access to local resources to limit the need for transportation and address mobility limitations

3. What will be needed to support people in their homes and communities? What combination of “neighborliness,” informal, or organized voluntary action, and agency-provided service will be needed? How can we ensure this mix is in place?

If more people are aging in place in the community, by choice or due to changes in state policy, we need to look at the necessary community connections, services, and care to make this work. One participant made the analogy with deinstitutionalization in mental health and cautioned that we learn from that experience:

“We’re seeing, probably what we saw with downsizing of the State hospitals years ago...it’s a good trend to put people back in the community and give them services, but you know, you close the door and people are on the street and they don’t have the services they need...there aren’t the monies at this point to get half the services they really need.”

“I think there’s quite a few people falling through the cracks, really. I mean, I’m thinking on my street, there are several houses with older people in them, and one of them gets Meals on Wheels, so they at least have that contact. But there are others who literally stay at home almost all the time, which can’t be good, mentally or physically or anything else.”

Policies and plans need to be informed not only by the availability of resources but by the willingness to access those resources, and by the resistance to being considered in need of charity—“needy.”

“And I think that people are more apt to ask for that kind of assistance if it doesn’t feel like you are asking a charity organization, [rather] that you’re asking your community organization, your community department, rec department, your community city hall, your community senior center. And I think a lot of these things should be run out of these community places, rather than places that people might perceive as charity types of organizations.”

“...[T]here’s a certain stigma attached to public transportation. And I think that’s part of the idea that it’s targeted towards particular populations...I think it would be nice to have it...for our community, not just for low-income people, and not just for people with disabilities or people that are seniors—that it’s not a program of agencies, but it is something that belongs to our community.”

For continued integrity and respect, we need to change our focus and language from “identifying needs” and “providing services” to ways of connecting people to one another and to resources with implied mutuality.

"[For Mozart of Wheels] it's totally not about the ride. It's about building relationships. And that's what makes it more authentic. It's not M feeling like she's a burden. It's a whole different thing."

4. How will we engage our aging residents in community life?

Participants suggested applying a new lens that specially focuses on seniors in our community life.

"I would love our city to have just a cultural default whenever anything is happening: how are our seniors going to participate in that?"

This statement does not presume the need for service, but rather urges awareness of an important segment of our population and a cultural and mental shift to thinking about how to reach and engage our older population to ensure that opportunities are accessible to them.

5. How will we engage our aging residents as assets in creating a livable community?

Many of the suggestions/comments were about ways in which to make Burlington a more livable city for all ages. Given some of the factors outlined above, it may in fact be wise to focus future public discussions on improving Burlington for all and not segmenting seniors, as segmenting has the potential to create a young/old divide with competing needs rather than shared concerns, and it reinforces perception of seniors as a "needy" population rather than a vibrant sector and tremendous asset in our community.

Finally, given what Burlington's 50+ residents are saying, it would be wise to consider an asset-based community development approach to creating a livable community for all ages. Burlington is rich in assets, including the skills of all of its citizens, the dedication of its citizens' associations, and the resources of its governmental and civic institutions. Instead of focusing on the community's needs, deficiencies, and problems, an asset-based community development approach will mobilize community strengths, facilitate community connections, engage our aging residents as community assets, and encourage the self-reliance Burlington's 50+ population seeks.

"It's very easy to make a difference [in Burlington]...there's one degree of separation between any of us and the governor of this state...and the neighborhood councils are a way for citizens to participate, no matter who they are, and to make—to really make—a difference. And that is democracy at its best, really."

Appendix A: Pre-session Questionnaire – Perceptions

1. Burlington has well-run community centers, recreation centers, parks, and other places where older people can socialize.
52% Agree or Strongly Agree. 11% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
2. Burlington has convenient places for me to participate in public meetings and events.
72% Agree or Strongly Agree. 9% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
3. There are ample opportunities to become a volunteer in Burlington.
91% Agree or Strongly Agree. 0% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
4. Burlington has dependable public transportation that I can/could use to get to places I would like to go.
39% Agree or Strongly Agree. 41% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
5. My neighborhood has safe, well-designed sidewalks that can take me where I want to go (e.g., to nearby grocery or drugstore).
45% Agree or Strongly Agree. 43% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
6. Burlington has roads designed for safe driving, with clear and unambiguous signage, traffic stops, and pedestrian crosswalks.
50% Agree or Strongly Agree. 32% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
7. Security and safety are a concern in Burlington.
62% Agree or Strongly Agree. 11% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
8. Security and safety are a concern in my neighborhood.
47% Agree or Strongly Agree. 28% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
9. My home is designed in a way that would allow me to complete my daily tasks if I had difficulty walking around or performing a physical activity.
62% Agree or Strongly Agree. 30% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
10. If I wanted or needed to leave my current home, I could find affordable housing options elsewhere in Burlington.
21% Agree or Strongly Agree. 45% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

Appendix B: Focused Conversation Discussion Guide

#	Question	Duration	Notes
	Introductory Remarks	10 min	
	Introductions: Name, number of years you have lived in Burlington, and current living arrangement (with family, shared housing, independent/assisted)	5 min	Once around
1	For transplants: What initially brought you to Burlington? What are some of the reasons you chose Burlington? For all: Why have you stayed? What makes Burlington a good place for you to live now?	15 min	
2	What might make it hard for you to stay in Burlington or lead you to consider moving away? 2A: What has been difficult or frustrating in the past year living in Burlington? In your home? Getting around town? Or feeling connected to others?	15 min	
3	If you have contemplated moving out of Burlington as you grow older, can you tell us what that community/place has that Burlington does not have? 3A: What factors/features would be important in choosing a new community?	10 min	Community Features
4	If a move was/is needed, what factors/features would be important in choosing housing? 4A: What are you looking for in a new housing situation to make that move acceptable? 4B: What are some of the things you don't want?	10 min	Housing
5	If there comes a time when you can't drive any more, or perhaps you don't drive now, how does this change your life?	10 min	Mobility
6	What are some simple, concrete actions or changes in Burlington that would make it easier for you to get out and about?	5 min	
7	What community events or activities are/could be offered in Burlington that would be interesting for you? 7A: Are there things you want to be doing that currently are not available?	10 min	Community Engagement
8	What are some simple, concrete actions that would make it easier for you to take part in community activities? 8A: What keeps you from doing what you want to do?	5 min	
9	With all we have discussed today, what community features would you say are the most important to you? What makes them important?	5 min	Once around Note: could ask first part of question only to cut down on time needed
	Complete Questionnaire	10 mins	
		110 mins	Note: This includes no breaks but is likely a good estimate of the time needed.

Appendix C: An Outline of the Conversations and Results

Community Features — Good

What are some of the reasons you chose Burlington? What makes Burlington a good place for you to live now?

Long timers

- Jobs brought them; good place to raise kids kept them
- Family roots and/or connections

New comers

- Small town/city feel with great cultural offerings
- Ability to connect with others, interface with elected officials, make a difference

All

- Lake Champlain, natural beauty, access to mountains
- Bike path

Many

- Liberal politics
- Walking access to downtown life
- University and College town—vibrancy, intellectualism
- Nice, caring, friendly people
- Feel safe; not worried about security

Community Features — Challenging

What might make it hard for you to stay in Burlington or lead you to consider moving away?

- Weather—snow removal, ice
- Noise
 - in downtown area and near UVM and Champlain College—pedestrians
 - in North End, emergency vehicles using sirens when no traffic
- Lack of affordable housing for elders, especially for middle class who do not own their homes
- Taxes high; rising taxes especially hard for individuals on fixed income
- Cost of living
- Need for family support as become less able

Housing

If a move was/is needed, what factors/features would be important in choosing housing?

People want

- Options—stay at home as long as possible → downsizing → shared living
- Some clearly want elder only; others equally want multi-generational
- Independence and privacy appear intertwined; willing/desire to share if still have privacy “independent in an interdependent”
- Housing and ability to continue to participate in community life are intertwined
- Connections with others in housing—more than just planned activities; shared interests
- “Neighborhood” people know and connect with one another; shops for goods/services *and* informal interaction
- One floor living and assisted living options in Burlington

- Options for the middle class—Burlington good for subsidized and wealthy but not much for anyone in between
- Personal pleasures: gardening, pets, personal cooking

People don't want

- Warehousing of elderly
- Isolation from shops, services, others

Happiest Stories

- Flynn Avenue Coop
- McCauley Square
- Burlington Co-housing

Biggest Worries

- Maintenance and upkeep of private homes
- What if?—"All of us are temporarily able"
- Affordability

Mobility and Accessibility

How do you get around? What are some simple, concrete, actions or changes in Burlington that would make it easier for you to get out and about?

Public Transportation

The Good:

- The buses that exist are great, especially College St. shuttle
- All buses have ability to lower stairs for easier entry
- Bus drivers are kind, courteous, and helpful
- SSTA is great but too limited
- Fares are reasonable

The Bad:

- Schedules do not seem to be set by the times/needs of potential users
- Buses do not drive through neighborhoods (especially North End) which means long distance to bus stop...longer than possible for many potential riders
- No service at night or Sundays when many of the cultural offerings are happening
- Few benches or enclosed shelters for waiting patrons
- Few signs re: routes and times

Suggestions:

- Mini-buses or vans instead of large buses that can go through neighborhoods
- On-demand system for those who donate their cars (e.g., Madison, WI)
- Special shuttles for community gatherings, cultural offerings, shopping areas
- Ride sharing and matching, so elders do not need to "ask" and be a burden
- Flexibility
- Market as environmentally friendly, community connection, not just transport
- Limit student parking

Walking

Sidewalks:

- uneven; unraked; unshoveled, or with great mounds of leaves and snow that prevent access to curb and parking meters
- elders compete for access with young walkers or bicycle riders who do not yield
- "complete streets"

Crosswalks:

- Not always clearly marked and/or with curb cuts on both ends
- Not enough time to cross on traffic lights
- Drivers do not yield to pedestrians—many mentioned the difference between Burlington and Montpelier, where everyone actually stops

Suggestions:

- Resting spots—benches along bike path, other walking routes, and at bus stops
- Longer time to cross street with visual and auditory signals
- Shoveling service—match community service/volunteer with elders

Driving

- Turn lanes marked on road and not on signs—hard to see
- Right on red confusing and not enforced

Parking

- Limited in downtown→ hesitant to come downtown, especially at night for cultural events
- Would like more Park-and-Ride options for special events

Community Engagement

What community events or activities are/could be offered in Burlington that would be interesting for you?

Cultural Events

Existing Events:

- Love all that Burlington has to offer
- Transportation a problem—even those who can drive do not want to in the evening due to sight limitations, other drivers, or need to park far away
- Many opportunities not well publicized and/or marketed directly to active elder population—it would be great if places like the Flynn had a link on website to special transportation
- Elders hesitant to join in crowds—mobility issues

New Offerings:

- Activities on the waterfront
- Opportunities for "active seniors" and "the physically and cognitively able," e.g., drop-in tennis for 55+; square dancing, lectures, etc. NOTE: perception that Sr. Centers cater to non-active or cognitively challenged, and only connect to people in the building and not in the community
- Learning opportunities, e.g., EEE or Middlebury program

Reaching More Elders:

- Community and civic organizations to have policy and practice of outreach to elders
- Discount tickets for elders, or “same day” pricing for events that are not sold out
- Event permitting to include “How are you helping accessibility to event?”
- Transportation options

Civic Engagement

- Easy to get engaged and be heard
- Appreciate community outreach
- Perception of catering to needs/desires of UVM and college students before community residents
- Meetings are not always accessible—transportation, location, time of day

Volunteerism

- Lots of opportunity; United Way and RSVP provide great matching services
- Looking for meaningful opportunities—to serve rather than be served
- Transportation can be a challenge

Other: People talking about their experience in aging

Generational Gaps

- College students and elders competing for housing, sidewalks, and parking
- Elders “invisible” or seen only as individuals “in need,” rather than as resources, treasures—want to be seen, heard, acknowledged, and valued/valuable
- Need cross-generational activities that engage (not entertain) elders (e.g., photography at Edmunds)

Some Suggestions to Connect

- Front Porch.com—connecting neighbors to one another; sharing local information; referrals to service providers
- Regular column in local paper for elders on activities and opportunities
- Websites for elders
- Resource book for elders
- Programs linking students and elders—photography class through Edmunds, City Youth Office, Burlington High School performance
- Better resources, and utilize senior centers as a community-wide resource; overcome perception of center for poor
- Storytelling to connect young and old

Services to help people stay independent

- Community building matching services wanted, e.g., drivers w/non-drivers; young shovelers w/frail elders
- Reliable personal care assistants and companions
- Loans for adapting housing
- Neighbors arranging/purchasing services as an association (e.g., Beacon Hill)

Perceptions/Attitudes

- I'm not a "senior" —age and ability
- "Asking for help" vs. "connecting with others"
- Being "entertained" (patronizing) vs. "engaged"
- Serving vs. being served
- Senior centers and Agency on Aging for the "needy" and not for everyone
- Volunteer to feel useful

Appendix D: Focus Group Demographics

Seven groups were convened, with a total of 55 residents. Community participants were recruited through the project's sponsoring organizations and other stakeholder groups. The participants are not a representative sample of the full diversity of Burlington residents:

- Three quarters of participants were women.
- They ranged in age from 49-87, with a mean age of 66.3.
- Their experience in Burlington ranged from three months to 64 yrs (or a lifetime).
- All but one were year round residents; 58% had family nearby; and 90% planned to stay in Burlington.
- 42% were employed, and the majority of those worked full-time.
- 22% had incomes less than \$20,000, and 42% had incomes greater than \$50,000.
- 86% were AARP members

