

AARP Vermont

Press Release

For Immediate Release

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City Residents Cite Changes to Make Burlington Livable

Burlington Livable Community Project releases research findings to public

MONTPELIER, VT, January 30, 2007 – Nearly 1,000 Burlington residents have taken the time to share their views on making the city a great place to grow old as part of the Burlington Livable Community Project, a collaborative approach to planning for the demands an aging population will place on the city, its residents and resources. The project is led by AARP Vermont in cooperation with the city and a group of some 30 community stakeholder organizations. The multi-year effort aims to provide direction, assess needs and resources and develop recommendations in the areas of housing, transportation and mobility and community engagement.

The findings confirmed why Burlington has been recognized as one of the nation's most desirable small cities, but also spotlights many areas for improvement and further discussion given the fast-changing demographics of an aging population.

“This is the first time anyone has reached out to such a broad segment of Burlington's older population to ask how they feel about living in the city, getting around, connecting with others and looking ahead,” said, Jennifer Wallace Brodeur of AARP Vermont. “This opinion research is an important part of engaging the public in a citywide discussion on making Burlington one of the best places to grow old in the nation.”

A comprehensive telephone survey to 800 city residents over age 45 as well as a series of seven focus groups with residents over 50 highlight much of what is attractive about Burlington while revealing several gaps in the areas of mobility, housing and community engagement. “Many common themes emerge from this research which we hope will inform policymakers, planners, community groups and the public as we look at adjusting to a growing older population,” said Wallace Brodeur, who is leading the initiative.

Among the findings under mobility were specific concerns about how older residents get around the city and the public transportation system itself. Transportation emerged as a key element to quality of life for residents and to preserving independence. Pedestrian issues such as safety at crosswalks and lights, places to sit and rest and sidewalk conditions were stressed by respondents and focus group participants.

On housing, the research data suggest most residents want to stay in their homes as long as possible and want to remain connected to family and the community. More affordable housing options for elders are needed, particularly the middle class, as well as assisted living and one-level housing choices. Housing settings that are age diverse appeal to a large segment of residents.

Staying engaged in the community is something respondents felt strongly about. Most volunteer and want to continue. Others stressed the need for more events, activities and learning opportunities geared to older residents, with transportation provided. The data showed that low income, less educated and the oldest citizens are those least likely to get involved in community activities.

“Clearly, we are in a time of change pushed by evolving demographics, the coming of age of a generation with different life experiences and attitudes, and new technologies,” said Wallace Brodeur. “The 50+ population, includes a significant portion of whom are baby boomers and quite active -- both physically and politically – are 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. This research is a first step in that direction.”

Heidi Klein, a research consultant who conducted the focus group process and drafted the report, stressed that the data spotlight a number of important common themes. “What we heard very clearly from participants is that they do not want to be defined primarily by their age and furthermore wish to distance themselves from the image of elders as burdens to others or to society. They wish to be engaged, recognized and valued as individuals and as community assets rather than a population segment needing services. They articulated a deep desire for meaningful community connections to continue their contributions to community life and to alleviate loneliness, prevent isolation and create relationships of helping one another. These themes infused the discussions of housing, mobility and community engagement.”

The findings will be shared with Burlington’s City Council and mayor’s office and will form the basis of the recommendations that project stakeholders are currently drafting.

The focus group research was conducted through The Snelling Center of Burlington and the telephone survey was conducted by Woelfel Research of Dunn Loring, VA. Full reports will be available at www.aarp.org/vt or by calling 802-224-1113.

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization with 120,000 members in Vermont and 35 million members nationally. Through a wide array of special benefits, services, and information resources, we help our members make important choices, reach their goals and dreams, and make the most of life after 50.

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