Improving Mobility for Older Users

By Ashlee Long, Planner

America's population is aging at a rapid pace. It is estimated that by the year 2034, people age 65 and older will outnumber children under 18 in America[1]. Driven by the baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964) this influx among adults ages 65 and older is reshaping how we need to think about daily activities, including transportation. While this demographic transformation is new for the United States, other countries around the world have already seen this population shift.

The graph below highlights the current trends as well as future projections for the population 65 and older in Orange County[2]. The 65 and older demographic is expected to continue growing over the next 15-20 years with a peak of over 76,000 people in the year 2036. This shift in demographics emphasizes the importance of utilizing universal design and meeting the requirements set forth under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

According to the 2018 AARP National Home and Community Preferences Survey, 80% of adults age 50 and older indicated a desire for, and likelihood of, aging in place[3]. One of the biggest challenges to aging in place is how to get around, even as people lose the ability to continue driving. In order to enable seniors to age in place successfully, communities need to look at the transportation system and start planning on how to adapt for the short and long term to allow for continued access and mobility. This may take the form of improving transportation infrastructure, creating an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Transition Plan, and adopting a Complete Streets policy.
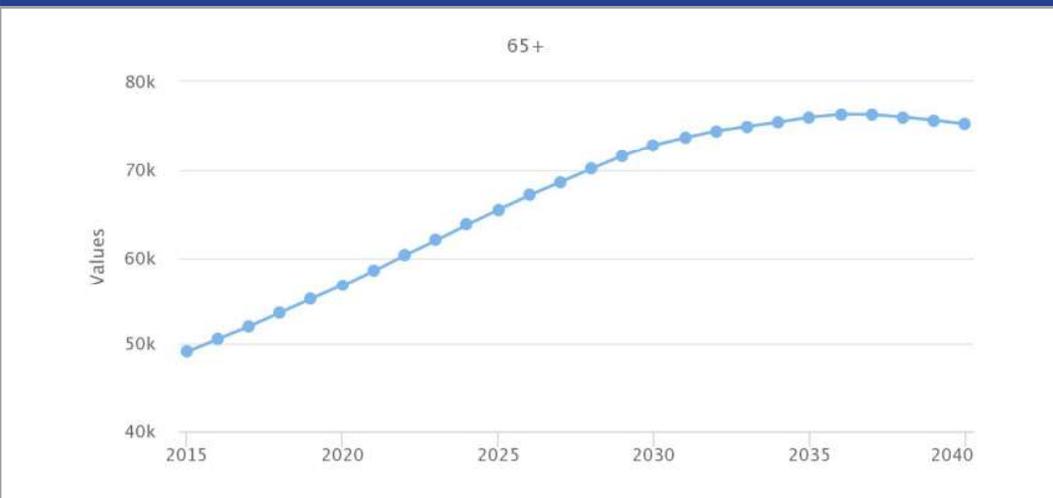
Improving Infrastructure

Improving infrastructure does not have to just refer to capital projects that take a large amount of time and money. Actions such as repainting crosswalks, re-timing signals to account for slower walking speeds, adding seating along sidewalks and at bus shelters, and creating bulb-outs to shorten pedestrian crossings are all methods that have been proven to create a transportation system that works for aging pedestrians. While some improvements require more planning, improvements such as repainting crosswalks can be incorporated into municipal level maintenance activities without incurring additional unforeseen costs.

When dealing with County or State-owned roadways, it would be beneficial for local municipalities to coordinate with the County and/or State so that scheduled maintenance activities on these roadways can be reviewed and smaller infrastructure improvements incorporated appropriately.

Future Projections for the Population 65 and Older in Orange County

Source: Cornell Program on Applied Demographics (PAD)

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1 https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/03/graying-america.html

2 https://pad.human.cornell.edu/counties/projections.cfm

3 https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/liv-com/2018/home-community-preferences-survey.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00231.001.pdf

Incorporating considerations for older drivers and pedestrians into the transportation infrastructure not only benefits those 65 and older, but benefits everyone to create safe access for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit users of all ages.

ADA Transition Plans

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) Transition Plan is another important tool for municipalities to use in creating a safer transportation system. The purpose for an ADA Transition Plan is to identify the barriers that prevent a person with disabilities from accessing programs and services provided by State and local governments. ADA Transition Plans are a requirement for those governments with more than 50 employees, as found in Title II of the 1990 American's with Disabilities Act[4]. ADA Transition Plans allow a municipality to look at the accessibility of all their sidewalks, curbs, pedestrian crossings/signals, shared use trails, parking lots, and bus stops, as well as other government programs and facilities. ADA Transition Plan are living documents meant to identify barriers to access and a schedule as to when those barriers will be addressed, as well as establishing a system for accepting and resolving complaints of disability discrimination. The seven requirements for an ADA Transition Plan can be found below. Municipalities interested in additional information or assistance in creating an ADA Transition Plan should reach out to the staff at the Orange County Transportation Council at OCTC@orangecountygov.com.
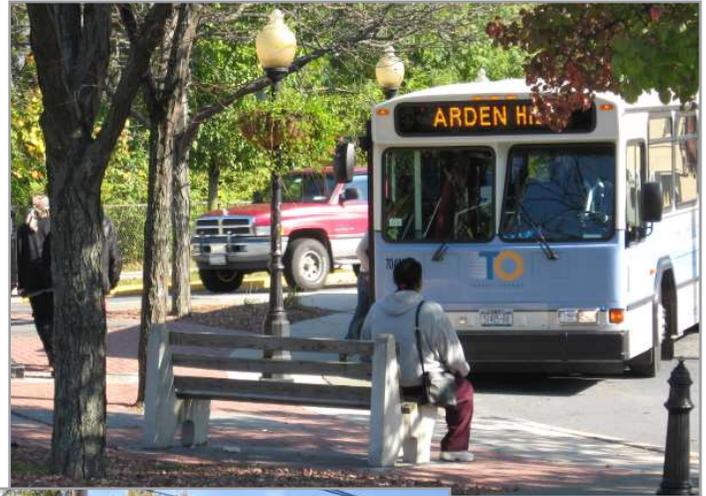
Examples of Infrastructure Improvements in Orange County

From Top to Bottom: Bus stop with seating, Goshen; Temporary bulb-out being built, City of Newburgh; Crosswalk with Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon, Goshen

Requirements of ADA Transition Plan

1. Identify ADA Coordinator
2. Identify Complaint Process
3. Develop/Adopt Design Standards
4. Identify Public Involvement Opportunities
5. Identify Barriers to Access
6. Identify Plan (time and budget) to Remove Barriers
7. Establish Reevaluation Schedule

4. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/civilrights/programs/ada/#:~:text=The%20Americans%20with%20Disabilities%20Act,all%20areas%20of%20public%20life.&text=The%20FHWA%20Office%20of%20Civil,%2C%20streets%2C%20and%20traffic%20management.

Complete Streets Policy Elements

Vision and Intent: Includes an equitable vision for how and why the community wants to complete its streets.

Diverse Users: Benefits all users equitably, particularly vulnerable users and the most underinvested and underserved communities.

Commitment in All Projects and Phases: Allies to new, retrofit/reconstruction, maintenance, and ongoing projects.

Clear, Accountable Expectations: Makes any exceptions specific and sets a clear procedure that requires high-level approval and public notice proir to exceptions being granted.

Jurisdiction: Required interagency coordination between government departments and partner agencies on Complete Streets.

Design: Directs the use of the latest and best design criteria and guidelines and sets a time frame for their implementation.

Land Use and Context Sensitivity: Considers the surrounding community's current and expected land use and transportation needs.

Performance Measures: Establish performance standards that are specific, equitable, and available to the public.

Projects Selection Criteria: Provides specific criteria to encourage funding prioritization for Complete Streets implementation.

Implementation Steps: Includes specific next steps for implementation of the policy.

Adopting a Complete Streets Policy

Streets that prioritize fast automobile travel create environments that are unsafe and difficult to navigate. These inhospitable environments can be overwhelming and present a large barrier to older adults, can lead to limited mobility and breed isolation. When a community adopts a Complete Streets policy, they are ensuring that the needs of older pedestrians and drivers are being considered every time a transportation investment decision is being made. An ideal Complete Streets policy will include the 10 elements, including, considering all users, stating a commitment to incorporating Complete Streets elements in all projects, clearly explaining any exceptions, and detailing how the policy will be implemented and measured.

Orange County adopted a county-wide Complete Streets policy in July 2017 and a New York State Complete Streets law was enacted in August 2011. Several other municipalities within Orange County have also adopted Complete Streets policies or resolutions, taking them one step closer to creating a safer space for the most vulnerable users. If you are interested in learning more about how to adopt a Complete Streets policy, contact an Orange County Transportation Council staff member at OCTC@orangecountygov.com or visit our website, https://www.orangecountygov.com/1922/Information-for-Municipalities.

Ensuring that seniors can remain in their communities and age in place will take on a greater importance as the senior population grows in the years ahead. These strategies are only some of the ways to help create safer spaces for both senior pedestrians and drivers.

OCTC
ORANGE COUNTY TRANSPORTATION COUNCIL

The OCTC is the Metropolitan Planning Organization for Orange County and is responsible for fostering inter-municipal cooperation and coordinating planning activities among municipalities and government agencies to fulfill countywide planning objectives, develop capital improvements, and supply public services.