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Putting Wichita on the map as a 'livable community'

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

When the National Association for Area Agencies on Aging — commonly called N4A — decided to take its Aging in Place Initiative on the road, Annette Graham was determined that Wichita would be one of the dozen stops that the nonprofit organization would make to help energize efforts for a “livable community” for all ages.

Graham is the executive director of the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, which serves Sedgwick, Butler, Harvey and Sumner counties. As an N4A board member, she’s well aware of the national push to have communities assess how ready they are to sustain and provide services for an aging population.

As the baby boomer generation — born between 1946 and 1964 — continues to reach retirement age, the number of Americans older than 65 is expected to reach 71.5 million by 2030. That’s twice the number of 65-plus Americans than the country had in the year 2000, according to national statistics.

The N4A was among five national organizations that partnered in 2005 to conduct a survey of 10,000 local governments to determine how ready these communities were to provide programs, policies and services to address an aging population.

“Less than half had even begun to think about that sort of planning,” said Sandy Markwood, N4A’s CEO.

Markwood noted that most older adults prefer to “age in place” in the communities where they’ve raised families and had careers. “Less than 5 percent of older adults are in nursing homes and that number is dwindling so we need to address” creating communities that can sustain an aging population, she said.

Armed with the survey data and bolstered by requests coming from com-

munities to develop a program to help jumpstart such planning at local levels, the N4A — along with the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities and MetLife — selected 12 U.S. communities where it would help organize such efforts.

Communities ranging in size from Chicago and Miami to Wichita were selected to host what N4A called Aging in Place workshops.

The summer summit

On June 23, 2009, more than 100 participants from not only senior service agencies but from the planning, building and government sectors, along with private citizens, came together at Wichita State University for the workshop “Revitalizing Communities for All Generations: Visioning a Livable Wichita Region.”

Efforts had already been under way in the community to include age-readiness planning, thanks to a subgroup of Visioneering Wichita called the Older Adult Alliance, Graham said. Visioneering Wichita is the community-wide effort to engineer a plan for what the community should look like in 20 years.

“We’ve been working hard to reach out to others who normally don’t get involved in issues of aging because the issue of aging is much, much bigger than we tend to envision,” said Graham. For example, the Older Adult Alliance put together planning tips for builders of the Intrust Arena to address the needs of more mature audience members attending events there.

“This summit really was a tipping point to get more people interested in talking about aging issues,” Graham said.

During the summer 2009 workshop, national and local experts talked about ways to encourage other concepts to create a livable community, a term that planners and aging experts are using to

define creating communities that are promoting and enhancing the quality of life for older Americans. Elements of a livable community include home designs, transportation services, intergenerational activities, and neighborhood amenities.

“If you have a livable community for all ages, it helps communities draw upon the assets of an aging community,” said Markwood, one of the workshop speakers. Older adults often give back to communities through volunteerism and community involvement, Markwood pointed out.

Graham agrees with that point. “Aging adults are part of the fabric of our community and are still vibrant members. They add economic value and value to the family unit and make for a stronger community all around.”

The Wichita workshop was among the highest attended among the dozen summits nationwide, Graham said.

“The energy and enthusiasm of the people in Wichita was exciting,” Markwood said.

Summit outcomes

Host communities were eligible to apply for what were called Jumpstart Grants — funded by the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities — to help initiatives or programs related to creating a livable community.

The energy and enthusiasm that Markwood noted at the summit led to 14 community projects being funded, with grants that ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,500.

“You often don’t need a big grant or a new program,” Markwood said.

One of the programs funded in the Wichita community was as simple as creating a community garden in the Planeview neighborhood, where a grocery

store isn’t within easy walking distance. Recently a resident of a northeast Wichita neighborhood called Graham’s agency to inquire about how to start a similar garden, after hearing about the the Planeview community garden.

“That’s the kind of thing these grants were intended to do — jumpstart ideas of what can be done throughout the city,” Graham said.

Other funded projects included creating universal design patio homes, a senior advocacy training program, intergenerational programming at senior centers and production of an aging-in-place DVD.

This article is part of a four-part series that will look at the concept of and local efforts toward creating a livable community for all ages in the Wichita and surrounding areas.

How to get involved

One of the initiatives that developed from the June 2009 summit in Wichita on creating a community for all ages is an advocacy training project.

The project, according to Annette Graham, Central Plains Area Agency on Aging executive director, will help train older adults on how to advocate for issues that affect themselves and their peers.

The project gets under way with a training session on Thursday, March 25, from 1-4:30 p.m. at 2622 W. Central Ave. Space is limited so call early to RSVP to (316) 660-5229.

Residents also can become involved in the Older Adult Alliance, a subgroup of the Visioneering Wichita project. To join the group, call (316) 660-5232.

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Where do I call?

Do you have questions about services available for older people? Call the information and referral number for the Department on Aging in your county for assistance.

- Wichita 660-5120
- Sedgwick County outside of Wichita phone exchanges
toll-free 1-800-367-7298
- Harvey County 284-6880 or toll free 1-800-750-7993
- Butler County 775-0500 or toll free 1-800-279-3655

Also, look for information on programs and services on the web at www.cpaaa.org

History offers models for tomorrow's neighborhoods

This article is the second of a four-part series that will look at the concept of and local efforts toward creating a livable community for all ages in the Wichita and surrounding areas. The first article, published in the April issue of Active Aging, covered the concept of livable communities. This article looks at the mixed-use neighborhoods and some of Wichita's efforts toward creating a more livable community.

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

When it comes to creating neighborhoods that integrate homes, shops and other services and having a viable transportation system to create a better livable community, Wichita can take a page from its past, says one local expert.

Livable communities is the term that planners and aging experts are using to define creating communities that are promoting and enhancing the quality of life for older Americans

After decades of urban sprawl, low gas prices and cars that made personal transportation affordable and easy, the appeal of large yards in suburban areas, and no real demand for the neighborhoods of the past, it may be harder for Wichita to go back to those aspects of its historic past, said John Wong, a Wichita native and public administration expert.

Wong, professor and interim director of Wichita State's Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs, was one of the experts who spoke at an aging-in-place workshop last year, "Revitalizing Communities for All Generations: Visioning a Livable Wichita Region."

The workshop was one of 12 that were held nationwide and sponsored by the National Association for Area Agencies on Agencies along with the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities, MetLife and the local Central Plains Area Agency on Aging.

More than 100 participants from not only senior service agencies but from the planning, building and government sectors, along with private citizens, attended the Wichita workshop.

Wichita's past

Getting around in Wichita was a lot easier before the introduction of family cars and paved roads, Wong noted. Since people didn't drive around, the mixed-used concept, even within a single building that might house a bank, another local business and apartments, became a matter of efficiency.

Mixed-use developments are those that integrate homes, businesses, community centers and schools into the neighborhood, or even one facility. Retail and other services are nearer to homes, often within walking distance, meaning less reliance on transportation.

"Everything was premised in the past on the hub-and-spoke transportation system and was more geared toward centralization and mixed use," Wong said, about Wichita's early days. In the hub-and-spoke model, the system has one centralized center with routes radiating out from that center.

Several factors led to Wichita dismantling its streetcar system and decentralizing neighborhoods, Wong said. As people started buying cars and paved roads came along, running streetcars was no longer financially feasible. Public buses were seen as less costly and more flexible to fill the need for public transportation. Malls started sprouting up in the 1970s, leading to the emptying of downtown.

As Baby Boomers married and had families, they sought more open spaces. Cheaper land values around Wichita made it more lucrative for developers to buy up land and carve it up into separate residential and commercial spaces.

"Traditional zoning is drawing boxes and that's the preference when land value is down and it's easy to get around," said Wong. Within those boxes tend to be very specific zoning requirements, such as commercial or residential, and more rigid land-use policies.

A 'Great Place'

There are a couple of places within Wichita where developers have created a mixed-use, intergenerational community, with Old Town being a prime example. In fact, the efforts to create a concentrated, vibrant community with a large public plaza, a farmer's market, theaters, restaurants, businesses and residents earned Old Town the designation as one of the "Great Places in America" in 2008 by the American Planning Association, Wong noted in his presentation.

If Wichitans want more of these types of communities, they need to start indicating a demand, said Wong.

"Legally, everything is in place to have this done," said Wong, referring to the Kansas statutes that dictate local planning commissions need to consider community needs for land use, zoning and such.

Sustainability, however, is a major consideration, said Wong. David Barber, advanced plans manager with the Wichita-Sedgwick County Metropolitan Area Planning Department, agrees with that point.

Barber noted this kind of development requires private investors, and that's been a shortcoming for creating these kinds of neighborhoods.

Another consideration is the cost it takes to rehab or renovate existing neighborhoods.

"It's more expensive to redevelop than to start from scratch," said Scott Knebel, principal planner with the MAPD.

Making plans

There is some activity going on within Wichita and Sedgwick County to create more livable communities, outside of redevelopment, said local planning officials.

For example, the Wichita Transit Authority is set to release a new plan for Wichita's transit system this summer, after conducting a community survey in 2008.

Working off a 1993 Comprehensive Plan, the city

and county continue to make improvements in pedestrian and bike paths. Fiscal constraints have prevented governmental officials from updating the plan, Barber noted, but progress in neighborhoods still continues.

Work was set to begin in April to paint bike lanes onto some downtown streets. A bike lane, albeit only one-half mile long, has already been striped onto Mount Vernon, near George Washington Boulevard, said Barber and Knebel.

Elevated railways, side streets and other such obstacles make it difficult to create bikeways in some areas, but they will probably become a more common sight.

In addition to the Comprehensive Plan, various neighborhoods also have specific plans, Barber noted. Citizens do have input on those plans, he said. They also have access to the plans online, by going to www.wichita.gov and clicking on the planning link on the left-hand menu column.

Citizen input is a key factor for any city making plans about its future, Wong pointed out.

"You have to participate," he said.

Citizens can get involved by attending public meetings and talking to civic and elected leaders about how they'd like to see their community develop, citizens can get involved, public administration officials advise.

For example, the Metropolitan Planning Area Commission, comprising 14 volunteers appointed by the Wichita City Council and Sedgwick County Board of Commissioners, holds public hearings and makes recommendations to the governing bodies concerning zoning, subdivision applications, and other development related issues. The group, whose regular meetings are also open to the public, is responsible for developing and maintaining the Comprehensive Plan for Wichita and Sedgwick County, according to its website.

A vision of a new Wichita, a community for the lifespan

This is the final article of a four-part series looking at the concept of creating a livable community for all ages in Wichita and surrounding areas. The Central Plains Area Agency on Aging and the Older Adult Alliance are spearheading efforts to raise awareness of these issues. The previous articles covered the concept of livable communities, some of Wichita's efforts toward creating such a place and the concept of universal design.

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

Wichita and the surrounding area has an opportunity to be at the forefront of a livable communities concept that's gaining momentum around the country and even is part of proposed Congressional legislation, says a local and national aging expert.

Livable communities is the term that planners and aging experts are using to define creating communities that promote and enhance the quality of life for older Americans. Elements of a livable community include home designs, transportation services, intergenerational activities, and neighborhood amenities and services.

"This really is becoming a national movement, and not just for older adults," said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association for Area Agencies on Aging, which is commonly called N4A. "And your community has really picked up the ball and is running down the field."

That's in large part because of Annette Graham and the agency she leads, the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, which serves Sedgwick, Butler and Harvey counties.

As an N4A board member, Graham has been aware of the concept and she was determined that the Wichita area not be on

the fringes of this movement. That's why she and the CPAAA lobbied for Wichita to become one of a dozen stops the N4A made when it took its Aging in Place initiative on the road last year.

"It's not just about aging," said Graham. She knew of a young teen who'd broken her leg and the family had to reconsider how to get the young woman up and down the stairs from her second-story bedroom. With a home design that used the universal design concept, that takes into account accessibility, such a problem could have been avoided.

Moving forward

Last year, more than 100 participants from not only senior service agencies but from the planning, building and government sectors, along with private citizens, came together at Wichita State University for the workshop "Revitalizing Communities for All Generations: Visioning a Livable Wichita Region."

The forum was intended to get the community thinking about ways to shape itself and make itself a community where people can not only grow up but grow old, said Graham.

"We want to move the community forward in thinking about the population and the demographics of our community," Graham said. She wants to make sure leaders and others in the community who are working on revitalization or plans to attract residents are not just looking at how to attract young people and families, but consider "the vitality of our aging population" as well.

CPAAA is working with a local market-

ing agency, Ponder Connect, to develop a presentation to take to employers, businesses, builders, developers, government leaders, architects and just about anyone else with a stake in shaping Wichita's future. With a lot of discussion on revitalization, the time is right, Graham thinks.

"It'll be a campaign to go out and meet with key partners and people to talk about these issues," said Graham.

"Communities need to start looking at themselves through a different lens and start serving people through their entire lifespan," noted Markwood of the N4A.

Legislative efforts

A hundred years ago, many cities, including Wichita, fit the idea of livable communities in a much better way. Services were readily available, public transportation was better and buildings often had multiuse purposes. The affordability of the car, the highway system and suburban sprawl helped dismantle that concept.

But the livable communities concept is taking hold again in some communities across the country and now legislation is proposed in Congress to help move that idea forward.

U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd from Connecticut is sponsoring the Livable Communities Act, which includes incentives and funding for communities that embrace the idea of creating places that revitalize Main Streets and urban centers, protect rural and green spaces and reduce gasoline consumption, among other things. A similar proposal has been made in the House of Representatives.

Some states, such as Georgia, are look-

ing at similar initiatives on the state level, too, said Markwood.

In 2005, Markwood's agency partnered with four other organizations to survey 10,000 local governments to determine how ready these communities were to provide programs, policies and services to address an aging population.

"Less than half had even begun to think about that sort of planning," she said. The agency released the results in 2006 – the year the first of the baby boomers, one of America's largest generations, turned 60, she noted. A follow-up survey is in the works to see how far those governments have come by 2011, when the first baby boomers hit 65.

Some shining stars

There are already some communities that have embraced the idea, Markwood noted. Some of the communities her agency recognized this year as having award-winning livable communities programs include Westchester County in New York where they've been auditing major intersections for pedestrian safety and senior mobility and around the Atlanta area where they are developing a list of seven principles for good community design.

In Fairfax County, Va., an expansive urban, suburban and rural area, elected officials there decided to adopt what it calls its 50+ Action Plan a few years ago and on which it grades itself every year. The action plan takes into account the aging demographics of its citizenry and ways to accommodate those needs and keep those talents.

The plan addresses affordability of

programs and services, housing options that incorporate universal design to meet the needs of every age, transportation options and ways to keep older adults engaged within the community.

Get involved

Citizen input is a key factor for any city making plans about its future, say public administration experts.

"You have to participate," said John Wong, former interim director at Wichita State's Hugo Wall School for Urban and Public Affairs.

Wichitans can get involved in helping the community become a livable community by attending public meetings of zoning committees, forums on neighborhood revitalization and talking to civic and elected leaders about how they'd like to see their community develop.

Since 2004, Wichita has had an initiative called Visioneering Wichita for citizens to work together on a common vision for the city's future. The Older Adult Alliance is part of that effort and regularly holds meetings, including one on Oct. 12. (Check the www.visioneeringwichita.com site for meeting information.)

Individuals may also get involved with the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging.

Read more about livable communities and how to get involved through their website, www.cpaaa.org.

Online resources

To read more about the livable community concept, go to:

www.aginginplaceinitiative.org

www.n4a.org

For more about Fairfax County, Va.'s plan, go to:

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/olderadults/plan.htm>