

ROCHESTER NY

There is a tsunami on the way—the baby boomers who are aging. While many communities are running for high ground, others, like Rochester, realize that the numbers of elderly residents are a constituency to be reckoned with for all the benefits they bring—benefits such as votes, brain power, expertise, and diversity. Embracing the voices of the elderly into the city planning process will lead to a better community for all ages. But where does one start?

There are many different ways of surveying the population to gather information on what the community wants and needs to support an aging population. Some of these methods are fairly informal, others much more detailed and complex. Community leaders in Rochester, New York organized a forum on aging in place and solicited input through small discussion groups. These discussion groups took place over a period of months and benefited from outside expertise as well as best practice information from other communities.

The City of Rochester, NY, was just beginning to focus on aging in place when Partners for Livable Communities joined the team. The important lesson to be learned from Rochester is the necessity of broad-based coalitions to build a livable community for all ages. Rochester put together a framework that included government officials, citizens, business leaders, and other stakeholders -- making the process of positive social change much easier.

Over the past 10 years, Rochester citizens, businesses, and government officials have changed the city's process of governing and planning to enable neighborhood groups and local merchants to work alongside public officials as equal partners. It has helped neighborhood residents plan their communities' future, and to implement their plans one project at a time.

Like most local governments, Rochester formerly planned for transportation, housing, and other issues through separate government departments developing plans and then soliciting public input. In 1994, a network of neighborhood groups helped elect from their own ranks a mayor who understood first-hand the frustration of citizens with being consulted in planning processes only after most of the work had already been done.

The mayor started a partnership between city planners and neighborhood residents to help neighborhoods develop their own plans. The “Neighbors Building Neighborhoods” program created ten neighborhood sectors, each of which was invited to develop a vision and goals for its future. These sectors effectively became the communities of Rochester, developing their own assets and social networks to effect positive social change from within.

Once the plans were made, they didn't sit on a shelf. The government required each department to adapt its planning and annual budgets to the goals and priorities identified in the neighborhood plans. The city developed an annual report that tracked the progress

of each community in advancing its goals and completing projects. All told, the ten communities identified over 400 projects and have completed most of them. The report created a steady drumbeat of progress that motivated each community to continue to collaborate and set its sights higher.

At the same time, residents and local merchants became increasingly knowledgeable of the planning process. By participating in processes to plan major transportation projects such as the redesign of a road, they became proficient in the details of transportation engineering and funding. In these and other ways, bridges were built between citizens, local businesses, and planners.

Working with Partners for Livable Communities beginning in 2005, Rochester began focusing on including aging in place strategies in the new planning process. Thanks to the collaborative efforts that had been developed over the previous ten years, citizens, aging advocates, planners, business leaders, and other stakeholders hit the ground running. The Rochester community quickly identified four aging in place priority areas: housing, transportation, community design, and land use and development. Within each area, broad-based groups identified a short-term project that could be completed in 90 days or less. For example, on the suggestion of one older resident, the transportation work group focused on extending the daily period for the Seniors Discount bus pass program throughout the day.

Modeling the Rochester experience may be difficult where communities do not have the history and track record of strong neighborhood/city partnerships. Nevertheless, it is a good example of the importance of putting the “client” in direct contact with the “implementer” as this process is more likely to result in projects and policies that are successful. More importantly, it is a good example of listening to a powerful constituency—one that can be an important ally in future government change efforts.
