

Affordability and Safety of Livable Communities: Lessons from Around the World
Washington, DC
Wednesday, June 30, 2010

Executive Summary

On June 30, 2010, AARP's Office of International Affairs hosted a half-day seminar on livable communities around the world, with an emphasis on improving safety and mobility, and enhancing affordability and sustainability. About 110 experts from government, civil society, business, academia, and the diplomatic community attended. The meeting was tied to the launch of the Summer 2010 edition of *The Journal*, which featured livable communities globally as its theme and included a cover story by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. *The Journal* is AARP's biannual international policy publication.

Elinor Ginzler, Senior Vice President of Livable Communities at AARP, opened the meeting by discussing the importance of language in the larger conversation of livable communities. She noted the importance not only of word choice when discussing livable communities, but also how the conversation is framed. She highlighted the importance of using the term "ageless" when discussing livable communities, as a livable community benefits all, not just older persons. Ms. Ginzler concluded her remarks by challenging all those present to learn both from positive and negative experiences and to work to get out of one's comfort zone.

Panel I: Road Safety and Age-Friendly Environments

The first panel focused on road safety and featured **Jana Lynott**, Senior Policy Advisor in AARP's Public Policy Institute as moderator, and **Ralph Buehler** of Virginia Tech, **Michael Ronkin** of Designing Streets for Pedestrians and Bicyclists, and **Linda Lawson** of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) as panelists.

Ms. Lynott opened the panel by noting some of the similarities and differences in American and Western European road safety. She highlighted the stagnation in U.S. accident levels in recent years and noted some of the different approaches Western European nations take to road safety.

Mr. Buehler's presentation was a comparative study between German and U.S. road safety, an area in which he is a leading expert. Mr. Buehler discussed similarities in U.S. and German infrastructure and travel needs, and highlighted one reason Germans may be more inclined to utilize public transportation -- the German government has worked tirelessly to make public transportation attractive to use. It offers discounts, ensures it provides prompt services and keeps it clean and efficient.

Mr. Ronkin followed by focusing his presentation on the Swiss model of road safety, noting that the Swiss view driving as a responsibility, not a right. As a result, the driving test is relatively difficult to pass and there are steep fines, scaled to personal income, associated with speeding and other

driving violations. Mr. Ronkin also highlighted the role parking plays in road safety. The more available parking, the more likely people are to drive as opposed to walk, or use public transportation. If less parking were available, more Americans may be encouraged to utilize alternative forms of transportation.

Ms. Lawson focused on the DOT's role in creating more livable communities. She highlighted the new federal partnership between DOT, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, all of which are working to create more livable communities and increase road safety. She also spoke about recent successes, including a decreasing fatality rate, and noted some of the DOT's most relevant programs, such as Safe Routes to School, and Towards Zero Deaths.

Panel II: Sustainable and Affordable Livability

Edward Johns of AARP served as the moderator for the second panel which included panelists **Abha Joshi-Ghani**, Sector Manager of the Urban Development and Local Government Unit of the World Bank; **Federico Gutierrez**, City Councilor in Medellin, Colombia; and **Rodney Harrell**, Senior Policy Advisor in AARP's Public Policy Institute.

Mr. Johns opened the session by highlighting the importance of creating sustainable and affordable communities as more and more people migrate into urban areas, noting that since 2008, the majority of the world population now lives in cities.

Ms. Joshi-Ghani focused on the World Bank's role in helping to build more livable communities in developing nations. She discussed the importance of proactive planning to limit urban sprawl as nations develop and cities grow. She also cited some of the World Bank's initiatives such as the Eco-2 Cities initiative, which helps cities in developing countries combine economic and ecological sustainability in their planning and development. She noted also the significance of rapid population aging in the world's cities, especially in poorer countries.

Mr. Gutierrez spoke about Medellin, Colombia, an example of successful urban planning in a middle-income country. He discussed a wide variety of the city's initiatives to create a livable community, ranging from innovative public transportation, such as aerial cable cars that are accessible to the city's poorest residents, and electronic escalators in hillside neighborhoods to allow older residents to age in place by promoting mobility and accessibility. He also highlighted numerous parks and libraries with different learning themes, all built in poor neighborhoods and by award-winning architects.

Dr. Harrell discussed the importance of both envisioning a livable community and encouraging "visit-ability." Ideally, a livable community would have a wide variety of housing options, so people from all walks of life have a place to live. Universal design, constructing housing so that all people including those 50+ and/or with disabilities can live there, is also a necessity in a livable community. Universal design incorporates design items such as wide doorways, no-step entries, grab bars, reinforced bathroom walls, lower door-handles, lower switch-boxes and a variety of other

design elements. Mr. Harrell also defined the term “visit-ability” as housing that incorporates several key elements of universal design, such as no-step entries, providing accessibility to visitors as well as residents of the home. .

Key-Note Speaker: Dr. John Beard, World Health Organization

Josh Collett, AARP’s Vice President of International Affairs, started the meeting’s final session with a brief introduction to AARP’s Office of International Affairs and AARP’s interest in global aging issues. He also provided an overview of the World Health Organization’s Age-Friendly Cities Initiative, headed by the event’s key-note speaker, **Dr. John Beard**.

Dr. Beard, Director of the Department of Ageing and Life Course at the World Health Organization, emphasized the importance of putting ideas into practice. He cited some simple changes that could be made to vastly improve the lives of older people living in developing countries, such as providing reading glasses and hearing aids.

He described WHO’s Age-Friendly Cities Initiative, which seeks to build a global network of cities that develop and implement policies beneficial to older inhabitants. Some of the elements that help to create an age-friendly city include: ample outdoor space; mobility; housing; communication and information; respect and social inclusion; civic participation; the opportunity for employment; and community support and health services. Dr. Beard concluded his presentation by highlighting some of the key changes member cities have implemented. New York City, recently inducted into the network, implemented a program entitled Safe Streets for Seniors which provided longer crossing times at intersections created refuge in streetscapes, and built median strip safety islands. Geneva, another member city, built more benches, improved footpaths, and created more lighting. A variety of cities and nations have already committed to WHO’s network, and that number is set to increase in the future.

The June 30 event, in conjunction with the Summer 2010 *Journal*, raised awareness about some of the key issues societies around the world will face in their attempts to create more livable communities. It was also part of AARP’s larger effort to call attention to the importance of creating safe and affordable “ageless” communities both in the U.S. and around the world. With creative thinking and enthusiasm to create a better future, more and more cities will become true livable communities for all ages.