

**Viva the Vital**

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## **It Takes a Village**

*By John W. Martin*

In our crisis-driven society, the attention of most Americans is riveted on the dramas of the day playing out on our plasma screens and newspapers. It's hard to devote much thought to problems looming 20 years ahead. But if there's one thing we can predict with certainty, it's that the inexorable aging of the Baby Boomer generation will create tremendous pressures for change in our communities.

Seniors from the G.I. and Silent generations are segregated in geezer ghettos like retirement communities and nursing homes. But our research suggests that Baby Boomers will reject that model for their golden years. In overwhelming numbers, they would rather "age in place," staying plugged in with family, friends and community. Unfortunately, a thicket of the zoning codes and other regulations thwart the natural evolution of our towns and cities into places where Boomers can thrive as they get older.

In a survey we conducted earlier this year for the Older Dominion Partnership, we found that 88 percent of Baby Boomers say they plan to live in their own home in their later years. For 70 percent, that desire holds true even if they become ill or disabled. Only nine percent see themselves pursuing conventional options such as assisted living, continuing care retirement or age-restricted housing.

Models for aging in place are springing up around the country. Best known is the Beacon Hill Village in Boston, which mobilizes government, non-profits and private businesses to do those things that seniors find difficult to do for themselves, whether it's walking the dog, weeding the garden, or finding a ride to the grocery store.

In a similar vein, local governments are looking at "universal design" – the building and retrofitting of houses to make them as livable for older adults and the disabled as for everyone else. Universal design emphasizes such features as no-step entrances, wider doors and hallways for wheelchairs, grab bars in bathrooms and electronic monitoring throughout.

Other groups are promoting intergenerational living. Current seniors living in large, empty homes can rent space to young people who, instead of paying rent, help with chores and errands. Ohio Wesleyan University is experimenting with multigenerational housing where students, faculty and alumni live together.

A more intractable issue is mobility and access. Our auto-centric society has dedicated trillions of dollars to the efficient movement of Single Occupancy Vehicles (SOVs), but a pittance for pedestrians and other transportation alternatives. When today's seniors can no longer drive themselves, they find themselves dependent upon others for transportation. Studies show that this loss of freedom results in a higher incidence of depression and institutionalization. The response of many communities has been to organize volunteers to drive seniors to their destinations. But such measures are stopgap at best: They perpetuate seniors' dependence.

The real challenge is redesigning our *communities* to be more age friendly. We need to ask ourselves not only how age-appropriate our housing stock is, but how age-appropriate our communities are. Are they walkable? Are they safe? Do they have easily accessible "third places" where people can congregate and socialize? Do they embrace intergenerational living? Do they help seniors remain vital and contributing members of society?

A national leader in addressing these issues has been Arlington, Va. This former bedroom community for Washington, D.C., has reorganized itself over the past three decades around pedestrian-friendly urban villages connected by Metro rail, Metro bus, and a vibrant county bus system. Planners pay close attention to the design of streetscapes and encourage a mix of complementary land uses – housing, offices, shops, grocery stores, libraries and other amenities – where the routine needs of life can be found within walking distance. In its advertising, Arlington celebrates this unprecedented access and mobility for all as a "car-free diet."

It would be impossible to replicate Arlington's village model almost anywhere else in America because a thicket of zoning and land use regulations prescribe large lots, wide roads, expansive parking lots and the segregation of houses, and offices and shops into pods accessible only by car. Sidewalks and bike paths are an afterthought. Golf carts, three-wheeled bicycles and other slow-moving vehicles that older adults can use for transportation are effectively zoned out of existence.

We all need to think about these issues now because local zoning codes and comprehensive plans change at a glacially slow pace. This is, in fact, the inspiration behind the Older Dominion Partnership (ODP), an initiative by business, government, foundations and non-profits to help Virginia prepare for the coming age wave. The ODP's work has just begun. The next step will involve broaden membership to include planners, home builders, developers, eldercare service providers and others who can help shape a truly ageless community.